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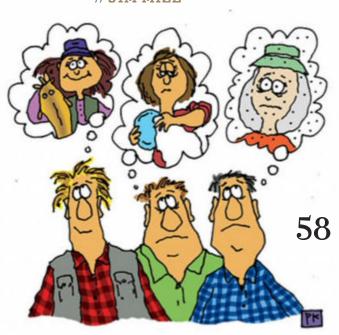
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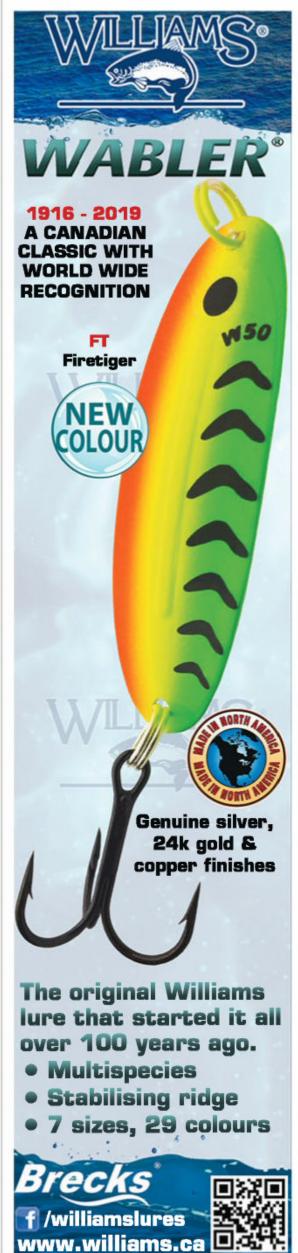
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IN-FISHERMAN (ISSN # 0276-9905) is published 7 times a year, including one double issue: Mar/Apr, May, June, July, Aug/Sep, Oct/Nov, Dec/Jan/Feb, by Outdoor Sportsman Group®, 1040 6th Ave., 12th Floor, New York, NY 10018-3703. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address change (Form 3579) to In-Fisherman, P.O. Box 37539, Boone, IA 50037-0539. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: 500 Rt. 46 East, Clifton, NJ 07011. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 41405030.

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Inside Angles

Secret Weapon

I've had a lot of success the past two decades, fishing with weighted swimbait hooks, especially Eagle Claw Lazer Sharp L111s and, more recently, Eagle Claw Trokar TK170s, coupling them with boottail swimbait bodies like the Berkley PowerBait Split Belly and Hollow Belly; but also many other options, especially tubes (produce beautiful glides), and what I call grinder baits like the 5-inch Berkley Havoc Grass Pig and the newly introduced PowerBait Power Swimmer.

They also couple superbly with craw-imitating options such as the Berkley Havoc Pit Boss and the Powerbait Chigger Craw—and with another overlooked craw-imitating option, the Berkley Gulp! Shrimp, which can be a killer at times, for largemouths and redfish.

These mainly fish best in shallower water, but adding a tungsten worm weight ahead of the rigging gets them fishing deeper. Because the rigging offers Texposed hook placement they fish superbly through or over top of cover or along edges, so just about anywhere you wish to throw them. Any kind of modest weighting on the hook shank adds a "keel effect" so lures don't roll over, but run straight and true.

I mentioned largemouths and redfish, but the rigging is adaptable for any predatory fish, depending on the situation. Obviously, as I said, for the two species I mentioned. But also for smallmouths holding near or in hardstem rushes and, occasionally, in other forms of heavy submerged weedcover—and in rivers when wood's a factor.





Pike go bonkers for this rigging. During a recent June trip to fish for them and shoot TV at Lac La Martre in the Northwest Territories, Associate Publisher George Large used the TK170 with a 5-inch Grass Pig coupled with a 5/0 TK170 to catch giant fish from skinny water. Exciting stuff as the rig can be run near the surface, which results in explosive strikes. Meanwhile, for hesitant fish, he would slowly grind the combo along at middepth, then kill it within a few feet of the reluctant fish, which often would charge the dropping lure and inhale it. A year before I used the rigging to grind big pike out of weedgrowth during July on Great Slave Lake, using a 9/0 TK170 in conjunction with an 8-inch Sebile Magic Swimmer Soft.

Redfish also go ballistic for this rigging, with waterboiling strikes—and again it's so easy to work the rig through and over shallow cover where the fish are foraging. For stripers and wipers, try a soft jerkbait like the PowerBait Jerk Shad.

The most recent addition of a blade on a weighted swimbait body aids in attraction and may also trigger fish once they are drawn in close. As I often say, though, every day on the water is an ongoing experiment in action, so sometimes the spinner is just what the fish want, other days not so much.

One recent trip fishing the new Eagle Claw Trokar TK178 was for largemouth bass in transition from late prespawn into spawn and postspawn on a body of water near Canton, Illinois. Local bass expert Todd Kent and I spent the day shooting TV, catching bass from 4 to just over 6 pounds.

I fished a traditional boottail body, the Berkley PowerBait Split Belly (5 inches) while Chef Todd (he's a chef at Jim's Steakhouse in downtown Peoria) made the nontraditional choice of the Berkley Rib Shad, which is a bulky-bodied boottail that measures 4.5 inches but fishes much more robustly than that.

Berkley PowerBait Rib Shad rigged on an Eagle Claw Trokar TK178



Rigging is straightforward. For the Split Belly, screw the keeper ring directly into the head of the softbait, stopping when the bait reaches the head of the ring. Position the hook in the split belly of the lure. Slide your thumb fingernail against the back of the shank of the widegap swimbait hook and pinch the softbait body directly above this position. This is the exact point at which to slide the hook point through the softbait to get it to ride Texposed. You may need to tuck the hook point into the back of the softbait to get it to ride perfectly Texposed.

We made casts to shallow cover and mostly used slow, steady grinding retrieves, although at times we also killed the moving lure, letting it flutter and swim to the bottom. Chef Todd's bigger-bodied Rib Shad produced the two biggest fish, a surprise, because I've mostly been successful fishing the Rib Shad for big walleyes with it rigged on a straight jighead like the Owner Saltwater Bullet Head.

The TK178 is available in a 3/0 size that weighs 1/8 ounce, and a 5/0 size that weighs 1/4 ounce. The 5/0 size couples well with 4.5- and 5-inch lure bodies. Use the smaller hook on smaller lures. Again, adding a tungsten worm weight ahead of the basic rigging gets this rig fishing effectively in deeper water.

Secret weapon? Well, maybe not a secret, but certainly a worthy option to have in your arsenal for your fishing in May.



"Guide Zack Brown (holding the fish) and In-Fisherman Associate Publisher George Large found pike in shallow water at Lac La Martre in early June, and used 5-inch Berkley PowerBait Grass Pigs on 5/0 Eagle Claw Trokar TK170 swimbait hooks to catch them.

Texposed Rigging with a Weighted Swimbait Hook



>> To rig a swimbait like the Berkley PowerBait Power Swimmer Texposed, first screw the keeper ring into the head of the lure.



>> Next, place the hook shank under the body of the lure with your thumb fingernail up against the back of the hook shank as you pinch the body of the lure. This is the spot to slide the hook through the body of the lure.



>>> Finished Texposed rigging has the hook point riding flat on top of the lure, making it a cinch to work through cover without snagging.

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Check it out at thisisfishing.us.

Bits&Pieces

Blending Fishery Science with Everyday Fishing ----

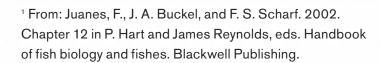
Tooth and the Wedge

Science into Action—As predators like pike and muskies get larger, the average size of prey in their diet also gets larger. At the same time, however, the range of prey sizes consumed also expands substantially with predator size. So while the upper limits of prey size rises as a function of mouth gape, smaller items also can be retained in the diet. This phenomenon causes a wedge-shaped pattern in the relationship between prey size and predator size.

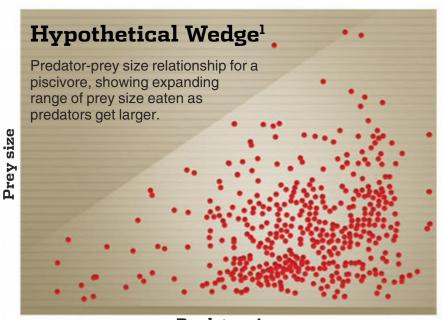
While larger lures catch larger fish on average, downsizing can bring catches of big fish, a pattern that seems most noticeable for esocids in spring and early summer. Pike, for example, have been shown to key on leeches in shallow bays in spring, where smaller baitfish also are vulnerable to predation. Leech-imitating soft plastics and bunny strip jigs can be productive leech patterns, as can swimming a dark rubber-skirted bass jig tipped with a dark softbait.

Relatively small lures, down to 5 to 6 inches, also can fill important niches in your muskie arsenal, especially from spring into early summer. They can excel in cooler water, on high-pressure waters, in shallow water, and where smaller baitfish are predominant. Smaller in-line bucktails like a #4 or #5 Mepps Aglia, smaller muskie crankbaits like the 5-inch Bucher Shallow Raider and others, and a variety of bass-size jerkbaits, spinnerbaits, and softbait-jig combos, all take big muskies at times, sometimes the biggest of the season.

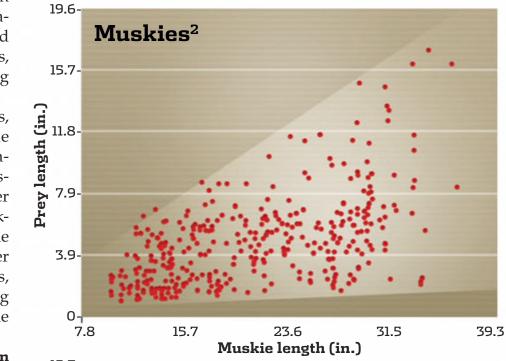
Dr. Rob Neumann

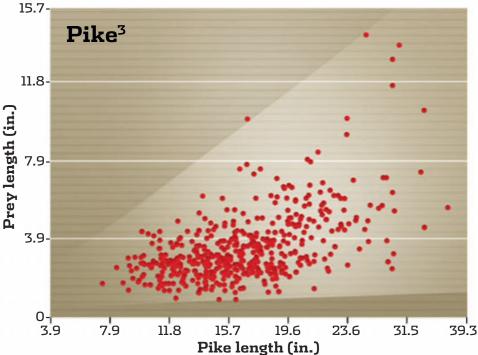


² From: Bozek, M. A., T. M. Burri, and R. V. Frie. 1999. Diets of muskellunge in northern Wisconsin lakes. N. Am. J. Fish. Mgmt. 19:258-270.









³ Adapted from: Margenau, T. L., P. Rasmussen, and J. M. Kampa. 1998. Factors affecting the growth of northern pike from Wisconsin water bodies. N. Am. J. Fish. Mgmt. 18:625-639. (laterally-compressed and fusiform prey overlaid on one figure).

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Frog-Bass Connections

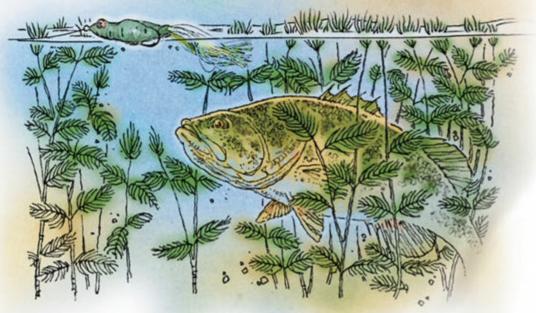
Field Notes—What do we know about bass predation on frogs and toads? A scan through the scientific literature on largemouth bass feeding yields several conclusions: First, in most bass waters, fish prey make up the major portion of the diet, with shad important wherever they're found. Bluegill and other sunfish are important prey in small impoundments across the country, especially where shad are absent.

In many waters, crayfish are prime prey. Diets tend to depend on available food types, and in many waters changes with season, likely due to changing availability of prey species of appropriate size. At times, bass eat

almost anything that fits in their mouth, including water snakes, ducklings, and rats.

In only a couple of studies have frogs comprised an important part of the diet. These lakes were in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Ontario, remote waters protected from farming and development. In other waters, frogs are relished by bass, but the fish don't find enough to subsist on.

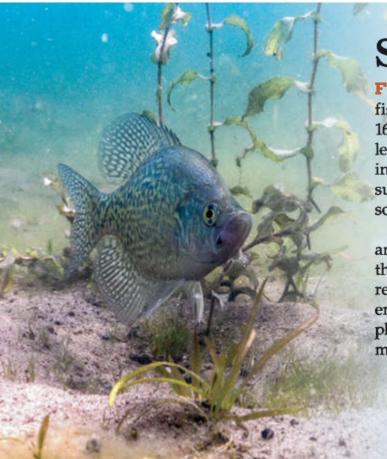
According to the U.S. Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.), research suggests that even though amphibians are declining worldwide, there is no clear cause. Though every region in the United States has suffered amphibian declines, threats differ among regions, and include human influence of metropolitan areas, disease, agriculture, pesticide applications, and climate trends. Amphibian declines are a global phenomenon that has continued in the United States since at least the 1960s. Declines are occurring even in protected national parks and refuges, the U.S.G.S says.



While adult frogs seem particularly palatable to bass, tadpoles may not be. Studies of bass in ponds and hatcheries have compared their diet preferences. Research has shown that bass quickly learn to avoid eating toad tadpoles due to their bad taste. Other investigations have found that bass avoid bullfrog tadpoles unless they're starving, though they readily eat larvae of leopard frogs and other species. When curious bass mouth a bullfrog tadpole, they typically spit it out. After a few more taste tests, they recognize and avoid that species.

Frog-lure fishing is a most exciting way to catch bass. It's the epitome of topwater fishing, as bites usually are explosive and the action occurs in thick cover, ensuring a battle. Science suggests that frogs are a rare treat for bass, but unfortunately one that's growing more rare. Take every opportunity to work locally to stop the destruction and draining of wetlands, pesticide abuse, and development that adds dangerous pollutants to fragile watersheds: home to frogs—and bass.

Steve Quinn and In-Fisherman



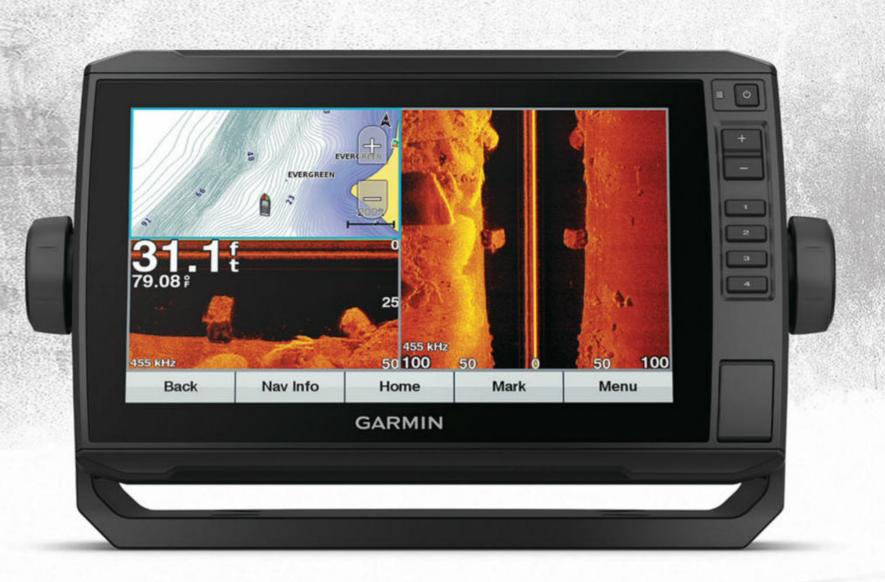
Spawntime Crappies

Fish Biology—The number of eggs produced by crappies depends on fish size. A 6-inch crappie might contain about 10,000 to 15,000 eggs, while a 16-incher can produce up to about 350,000 eggs. Mature crappie eggs are slightly less than 1 mm in diameter, about the diameter of a pinhead. In some cases, eggs in individual crappies have been shown to have multi-modal size distributions, suggesting that those individuals might spawn more than once in a single season. Immature eggs can be resorbed at the end of the spawning season.

To tell if a crappie is actively spawning, hold it on its back and run your thumb and index finger from just behind the gills to the vent (the external opening near the anus where fish excrete eggs or milt). Use gentle to moderate pressure and repeat a few times. Spawning males release milt, a milky white fluid. Females emit eggs only when close to ovulation or actively spawning. Prespawn fish look plump, but won't release eggs or sperm. Postspawn fish look thin and ragged, and may have swollen vents. Postspawn females might only secrete orange fluid.

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Kristine Fischer



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Contact: Guide Larry Hemphill, 530/674-0276, lunkerlarry.com.

Steve Ryan



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ALABAMA

Largemouths » Arguably the shining star of the Tennessee River system, with mega-schools of bass up to and surpassing 8 pounds.

Contact: Guide Casey Martin, 256/653-3019; lodging at D&E Landing, 256/506-BASS, delanding.com.

Jeff Gustafson



NEW RIVER

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GRENADA

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GRENADA AND ENID LAKES MISSISSIPPI

Crappies » We feature these two lakes a lot because the fishing for crappies from 1.5 to 2 pounds, and often larger, is so spectacular, especially once spring crowds thin. During summer the lakes settle in for the most consistent fishing of the year.

Contact: Grenada Lake Crappie Guides, 662/417-9117, grenadalakecrappieguides.com; Longbranch Guides, 662/251-5625, longbranchguides.com.

Doug Stange



Feature Travel Tips from In-Fisherman Staff & Friends

■ NIAGARA RIVER NEW YORK -

Lake Trout » **Som**e of the best fishing in the lower 48 transpires in **May, as scores of lake** trout up to 20 pounds fall prey to shallow pitching tactics with soft swimbaits—plus huge walleyes and steelhead.

Contact: Captain Frank Campbell, 716/523-0013, niagaracharter.com.

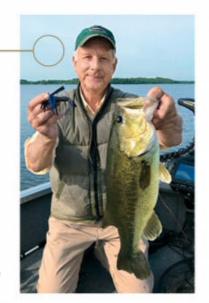
Matt Straw



Largemouths » Dozens of lakes in an area from Fergus Falls to Perham have lots of fish from 3 to 5 pounds. The fishing starts in early May and peaks in summer and fall. Plus walleyes, smallmouths, and panfish.

Contact: Josh Hagemeister, minnesotaguideservice.com; Justin Lightfoot, lighttfootoutdoors.com; Ross Hagemeister, meisterguideservice.com; Pat Donelan, ottertailfishingguide.com.

Doug Stange



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Contact: Guide Keith Wray, "Fish Doc" Guide Service, 336/589-9025.

Jim Gronaw

CHARLESTON

Multispecies » The backwaters of the Intracoastal Waterway produce good year-round fishing for sea trout and redfish. Cobia also move into estuaries in May. Amberjack

and black sea bass are on artificial reefs just off shore.

Contact: Capt. Richard Stoughton, 843/729-5203, captainrichard.com; The

Charleston Angler, 843/571-

3899, thecharlestonangler.com.

Cory Schmidt





RAINY LAKE ONTARIO

Walleyes, Pike & Smallmouths » One of the best drive-to options in Canada for walleyes up to 10 pounds, pike to 20, plus smallmouth bass and crappies. Stay in Fort Frances, or consider Camp Narrows Lodge on the water in Northwest Bay.

Contact: Camp Narrows Lodge, 807/274-2121, campnarrows.com.

Doug Stange





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Smallmouths » At ice-out, big bass flock to nearshore reefs to feed on gobies and emerald shiners, then invade Buffalo Harbor in droves. Drop-shot rigs and tubes load the boat with 4- to 5-pounders, with a shot at a 6- or 7-pounder.

Contact: Capt. Frank Campbell, 716/284-8546, *niagaracharter.com*; Fish Niagara, 716/282-8992, *niagara-usa.com*. ■

Steve Quinn

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New and Unique Fishing Stuff, as Reviewed by the In-Fisherman Staff

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PARMICUU



Ricochet Rabbit

The shallow-diving square-billed flat-sided Bagley **Flat Balsa B2** (2.75 inches and 3/8 ounce) stops on a dime during a grinding retrieve and ricochets off cover while sending out flashy vibrations to call in and trigger big bass—\$8.99, **bagleybait.com**



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Calendars work fine for making sure you don't miss a doctor's appointment or your wedding anniversary; not so much in planning for fishing trips. This year, March 20 ushered in the spring season or vernal equinox. That defines the point in spring when the sun stands directly above the equator and day and night are about equal in length.



In Florida, most largemouth bass have completed their spawn and moved into feeding patterns by that time. In Texas, late March can bring the height of the spawn when giant females move onto beds to drop their eggs, though the spawn season there may last for another six weeks or more. And in Minnesota and other regions near the northern boundary of the bass' range, lakes are covered with a foot or two of ice in most years.

FIGURE STATES

BY STEVE QUINN*

enough to spur bass to feed more aggressively than they have all winter.

This can be a very specific window. For example, veteran guide and pro Kelly Jordan of Texas keeps a close eye conditions on local lakes. "Each year, there are only about two

to five days where everything is perfectly aligned to catch a giant prespawn female," Jordan says. "I recall a day in March when this occurred at Lake Fork some years ago. That day, anglers caught three Share Lunker bass over 13 pounds, including one over 16. Dozens of 10-pounders were caught all over the lake and at other nearby waters as well. Unfortunately, I was out of town for a tournament and missed it.

"Those situations occur in spring at the end of the first sustained warming trend that follows a spell of cold weather. If clear skies, warming temperatures, and light winds follow a cold front, the window starts to open. The longer the warming trend lasts, the better."

habitat to spawning. We often refer to this transition state as "staging."

In northern Minnesota, by contrast, once bass begin spawning, the last individuals to bed, often small adults, may be guarding fry just two to three weeks later. This makes timing critical in planning trips or tournament strategies.

In northern waters, "typical" spring warming occurs quickly, melting the last of the ice pack. Continued sun and warm temperatures can warm shallow bays into the upper-40°F range within days, luring bass into shallow cover to warm up, begin feeding, and eventually to spawn. Depending on the year's weather cycle, that can occur from late March into late May. Fish respond to natural cues including water temperature, day length, prevailing winds, and amount of sunlight.

In a given year, latitude can be a good guide for the spring cycle including prespawn, spawn, and postspawn behavior and location in the central part of the continent. Here in Central Minnesota, lake conditions and bass behavior typically lag about two weeks behind those in lakes around Minneapolis-St. Paul, about 130 miles to the south.

Two key factors alter this progression—coastal location and elevation. Though far from warm in winter, the Atlantic Ocean acts as a

SOUTH to NORTH

As you read this article some weeks later, the seasonal progression continues, and follows some rather predictable patterns, though again, not always based on days of the month.

Bass and other fish species are genetically dialed into their local habitat and climatic conditions, tuned into their environment you could say. In spring, the largemouth's prime focus turns to spawning, but that's best accomplished on a full stomach. Prespawn fish, particularly females, are at their maximum weight just prior to bedding and can lose more than a pound in subsequent weeks. The magic happens when waters warm

Effects of Latitude on Attitude

By the time you read this article, prespawn transitions may have passed in southerly bass locations. Biologists in Florida assure me that bass may begin spawning there in December, yet some fish continue to bed well into May, making for a near-six-month Prespawn Period there. Florida bass are in no rush, as mild conditions prevail for months, with occasional intervals or colder weather that turn back the bass' clock. A good rule is that the milder the climate, the longer the transition from winter

buffer of sorts for cold temperatures. When I lived in Massachusetts, I marveled at the milder winter season in the Cape Cod area that juts way out into the ocean, and I'd take advantage of great prespawn fishing there as early as late February.

On the West Coast, the far milder North Pacific Current and related flows warm coastal regions from Alaska to California. These result in milder conditions, as lakes in western Washington rarely are icecovered, although they sit at a far higher latitude than most of Minnesota. Farther south, moderate temperatures foster the growth of the largest bass in the world in central and southern California. Washington's largemouth record stands at 12.53 pounds, while the Massachusetts standard is a massive 15.5 pounds, both caught near the coast.

Elevation also affects weather and water and thus bass behavior and growth. Many waters in mountainous regions remain too cold to support largemouths, so they are coldwater fisheries supporting trout, salmon, and char. In some parts of the Rockies and Adirondack Mountains of New York, bass survive but have an abbreviated season that postpones feeding and spawning, limiting growth potential.

Postspawn Transitions

Once bass abandon spawning areas and schools of fry are left to their instincts, bass turn to feeding. Again, this transition is more hasty in northern locations as the short summer feeding period spurs fish ahead. In more temperate and southern locations, you may find prespawn and postspawn bass, along with bedding fish, in some waters.

Where vegetation is abundant, such as in Florida and northern natural lakes, bass move, but usually not far. In northern lakes, they shift to middepth areas where plants, such as cabbage, sprout early and provide excellent cover. For feeding, bass find many minnows and shiners that

nest in shallow sand and gravel once waters warm into the upper-60°F range. Soon after, bluegills and other sunfish gather in nesting areas and large female bass lurk nearby, eager for a big meal of sunfish distracted by spawning rituals. Boat docks and fallen trees also provide good early-season cover, as deeper vegetation has not yet developed.

Top presentations include lightly weighted tubes and jigs, wacky worms, and weightless softbaits like stickworms and flukes. Work them slowly around the best available shallow cover. Because bass are shallow (2 to 5 feet deep) and the water's clear, long casts are key. Light lures and long casts point to the need for long spinning rods with braided line tipped with a fluorocarbon leader, a combination of power and stealth that's unmatched in these conditions.

In major river systems like the Mississippi, the bite is always shallow, and vegetation abundant even during the Prespawn Period. For fishing grass and woodcover, the swimjig has become a top option. It fishes well in current and slack water, imitating shad or bluegills, depending on lure color. And by fine-tuning trailers and retrieve speed, jigs run from the surface down to five feet, which is the typical bite zone in river systems. In addition to preyfish type, water color influences choice of skirts. While white and chartreuse

can work anywhere, pinks and orange hues offer maximum visibility in murky water. And where it's clear, darker tones like green pumpkin and black/blue are good picks.

In Florida, natural lakes are generally more homogeneous in structure, and the lack of wintry conditions allows many types of vegetation to flourish yearround. And with prespawn, spawn, and postspawn patterns occurring simultaneously over several months, patterns are harder to decipher. Since moving to Florida, veteran angler and industry insider Joe Balog has found several keys to finding big Florida bass once they've spawned. "Probably the number one thing to consider is that most postspawn bass hang around shallow spawning areas for a while," Balog says. "There generally isn't a major migration out to deep water, or outer grasslines as occurs in other regions.

"Most of the best fishing in the Postspawn Period continues near spawning areas. Last year, for example, we did well fishing reed beds in Lake George on the St. Johns River well into April. Bass had spawned there about month earlier. Buzzbaits can be good, as well as buzz frogs. Skinny Dipper-type swimbaits rigged weedless are hard to beat.

"Another factor to consider, especially for big fish, is locating areas of heavy cover in and around



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spawning areas. My biggest bass to date—just under 12 pounds—was caught flipping a mat close to a bedding area in mid-April. She was 28.75 inches long and was spawned out—likely a 13- or 14-pounder before bedding. She bit a Zoom Z-Hog rigged with a 1-ounce weight.

"Vertical cover is attractive to postspawn fish, often standing timber or reeds. I joke that bass like to 'lean up against something' after they've spawned. Brush or bulrushes, with a mat of pennywort or hyacinths on top is an ideal spot for a postspawn giant. In that cover, flip Beaver-style baits on heavy braid with a stout rod.

"Another option is inside grasslines not far from spawning grounds. It's shallow—sometimes less than two feet deep around hydrilla or milfoil—with a sandy bottom. Here, male bass cruise up and down chasing intruders and guarding fry, while the females hold in thick clumps of vegetation. They're spooky, but they're there. Make long casts with lures like Speedworms or Skinny Dippers. Where vegetation is more matted, weedless frogs are deadly, especially for big bass," he says.

»In spring, Cody Meyer relies on crankbaits to fish the strike zone and cover water quickly along extensive rocky stretches.

California offers a vast array of waters stretching from the Mexican border to Oregon, but hard structure, particularly rock, predominates in shallow and deep waters. Veteran pro Cody Meyer points to rock patterns as key in spring, both during the Prespawn and Postspawn periods. "In Clear Lake and many reservoirs, boulders and natural rock formations offer the best cover," Meyer says. "And on the Cal Delta and lots of impoundments, manmade riprap is the basis for the best bites. Whether natural or artificial, it offers bass easy access to shallow or deep water without moving far laterally. Early, they move up in milder, warming conditions, shifting deeper in the face of cold fronts. In waters like the Delta, where tides vary 4 to 5 feet, bass hold out of the brunt of the current, but close to it. They seem to know that baitfish orient to it and group tightly in fast flows."

For fishing this hard and steep cover, Meyer relies heavily on crankbaits throughout spring. "They allow you to work fast along rock walls,



riprap, and other structures," he says. "In some situations, you pick up a fish here and there, and sometimes you fish along and come upon a group of bass in a small area. Either way, the crank's a winner."

In large reservoirs where threadfin and gizzard shad dominate the forage base, some bass remain shallow, holding near vegetation edges, docks, and riprap areas where schools of shad spawn in vast numbers. Texas pro Keith Combs says the shad spawn can trigger fast fishing. "The shad spawn

Postspawn Pattern Lure Selection



Once spawning is complete, bass start feeding, and presentation patterns can be diverse. Some bass lurk shallow to intercept spawning sunfish and shad, while others move to middepth or deeper structure where early summer patterns begin.







KVD Jerk Bait

begins with water in the upper-60°F range and continuing into the 70s," he says. "Shad broadcast their eggs onto the harder surfaces that vary with what the reservoir offers. Here in East Texas, shad often spawn along edges of hydrilla. On Lake Texoma, it occurs along piers and rock walls." Fishing near these spawning schools is a hot pattern as bass hold near them, feeding almost at will. "Peak spawning activity occurs early in the morning, so fishing the shad spawn early in the day is generally a great postspawn pattern," Combs adds. "Spinnerbaits, swim jigs, blade jigs, and square-bill crankbaits stay high in the water column where they spawn."

Anglers sometimes find that most bass caught feeding on shad are smaller males, ranging from 1 to 3 pounds. These fish have labored longest to defend beds from predators after the big females have departed. They can remain shallow and shift from defending to feeding in short order. In some systems, there's an opportunity to catch big postspawn

females out on deeper structure far from spawning coves. "I'm not sure why, but the deep postspawn bite seems best in lakes with big populations of bass," Combs says, and he's enjoyed banner days on top East Texas fisheries like Toledo Bend, Sam Rayburn, and Fork, as well as reservoirs farther east in Alabama.

"Check long main-lake points, sunken humps, and deeper channel turns," he says. "Bass may hold from 8 feet or so down to 30, but average depth is around 20 feet. Deep-diving cranks, heavy swimbaits, football jigs, and flutter spoons all can work on these deep structures. These bass haven't been pressured yet and often bite aggressively.

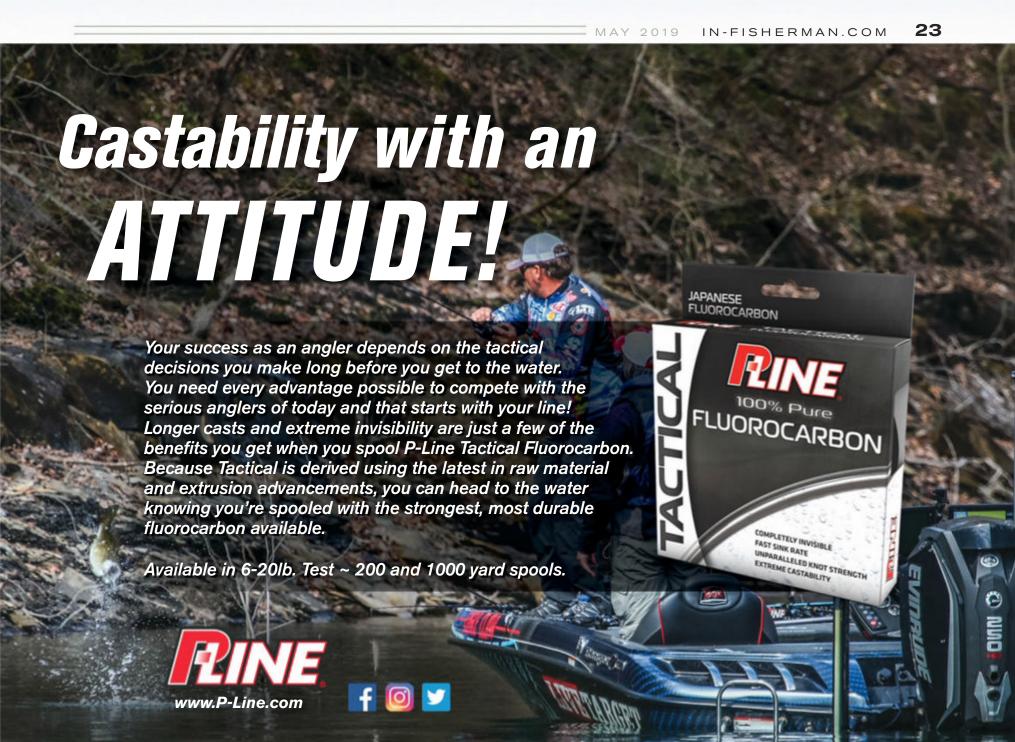
"The postspawn often involves a variety of patterns, so don't get locked into doing just one thing. On any lake with good beds of vegetation, bass move into grass flats. Here, it's mostly milfoil and hydrilla. They bury up in the middle of the beds, not near the deep edge; that pattern develops later in summer. They're

there to feed, so fish aggressively. I often use a big shallow-running jerkbait like the Strike King KVD Jerk Bait, working it over the top of vegetation and in holes," he says.

Jerkbaits are an overlooked option during the Postspawn Period and into early Sumer. Late last spring on Ross Barnett Reservoir in Mississippi, both Kevin and Jonathan VanDam used them to take high finishes at the Bassmaster Elite event, when bass had just finished spawning. They fish fast with exaggerated rod action to trigger bites from shallow bass.

This is a fine time to open your tackle bag and your mind and to check the various location options available to bass now. Much of anglers' pessimistic attitudes about postspawn fishing are due to folks getting pigeon-holed into only searching certain locales and with a small selection of presentations.

*In-Fisherman Field Editor Steve Quinn is a bass authority and decades-long writer for In-Fisherman publications.



During the Canadian Invasion of the early 21st century, people like Jeff "Gussy" Gustafson and the infamous Lindsay brothers came down here and took our money. It was taken by winning "our" smallmouth tournaments. Then they refused to tell us how.

Sweet MARABOU Treats

So it was a friendly invasion except for the hockey tactics. I remember one Canadian laughing at the weigh-in of the Sturgeon Bay Open as he bragged about muscling between two boats, declaring, "I'd like to apologize in advance for what I'm about to do to you boys." His countrymen laughed as he described the faces in other boats as he hauled in one porker smallmouth after another with little marabou jigs tacked to their jaws.

The Canadians were simply accepting the gauntlet thrown down by amateur local contestants who more-or-less ignored proximity rules. Al Lindner went home after one tournament rather disgusted by the improprieties. The Canadians just exchanged smiles, quietly acknowledging they can play that game, too.

But the most interesting thing about the Invasion was a secrecy pact somehow agreed to by so many players. Canadians refused to describe to anyone, much less media people, what they were using and how they were using it. Loose lips sink Alumacrafts, you see.

Fellow *In-Fisherman* Field Editor Gord Pyzer—a former Ontario resource manager—laughed when I broached the subject. "It was a strict rule in our boat for 25 to 30 years that the fastest way to find yourself pitched into the lake was to take a picture of a bass with a marabou jig anywhere to be seen in the image," he says.

"Same for describing how to use them. So I'm sure I have no images to share."

But those Badgers playing boat hockey had to find out, so they checked some Canadians into the boards. "Norm Lindsay said that when he and his brother traveled south to the Sturgeon Bay Open in Wisconsin each spring, other anglers would use their electric trolling motors to come so close they would literally bang into them to catch a glimpse of what they were using," Pyzer says. "They were frustrated because they couldn't buy a bite, and yet every time they turned around, they saw Dave and Norm netting another big bass." And the Lindsays took our money. Lots of it, in fact, over the years.

But that was then and this is now. Not long ago, Pyzer spent a day on the water with Bassmaster Elite Series angler Ott DeFoe while he practiced for an event on the Mississippi River near La Crosse, Wisconsin—but his next Elite Series event would be on Sturgeon Bay. When DeFoe learned Pyzer was from northwestern Ontario, he said, "I hear you guys up there have a secret hair-jig program that catches the heck out of bass."

By then, some Wisconsin guides and astute anglers had picked up on the marabou "secret." The cat was out of the bag, so Pyzer described the jigs and tactics to DeFoe, who went on to win the 2016 Angler of the Year Championship at Sturgeon Bay. "I watched DeFoe take the stage that day, burdened with a heavy bag," Pyzer says. "As he walked off the stage, I heard my cell phone ping. The message read, 'Hi, Gord. It worked! Thank you!"

BY MATT STRAW*

Feather Heads

"Natural ain't perfect, and I am very fond of the asymmetrical," says renegade hair-jig artist, Paul Jensen, owner of Jensen jigs. "I won't change my ideas on length, though. Most marabou jigs out there are just too short. There needs to be someone who ties long. You always have the option of trimming the jig. I use a long-shank, 3/0 hook to reach the end of the feathers. I like to add a couple strands of holographic flashabou. And finally - what is becoming my 'signature'—some red Metz soft hackle on just one side of the body."

Andy Vallombroso, owner of Andy's Custom Bass Lures, has been tying marabou jigs for a long time and has a more utilitarian vision. His Marabou Pro Series Jigs come in only two sizes (1/16- and 1/8-ounce) and three colors (black, white, and avocado). "We're a custom shop," he says. "Not mass produced, but not a whole lot to a marabou jig, either. The hook is important. We use a Mustad black nickel hook. A lot of guys are getting marabou jigs from overseas



Pro Series Jig

with cheap hooks. Mustad black nickel is sharp, allowing you to use light line—critical with marabou. Premium marabou is tough to find. We get it from the butt of a chicken. Butt feathers are hard to get. Makes a big difference. The texture and length is superior to turkey marabou. Can't get good consistency of length with turkey. The trick is to tie them thick. Tournament bass guys know when our jig gets wet it tapers down, but not to a thin pencil line. It moves more like a leech. Guys have been winning tournaments all over the country with it. The cold water guys up in the Northeast and Canada gobble these up. The have to be at least 2 to 2½ inches. It's a full, heavy, dense jig with a lot of marabou—up to 125 strands on each jig."



Jensen Jigs



PJ's Tackle Marabou Jig

Jim Hall, owner of PJ's Tackle, says his wife designs and ties their marabou jigs—one of the most extensive lineups in North America. "My wife was the tier originally, and we fished them for trout on the Little Red River," Hall says. "We caught thousands for sure, then started to catch crappies on them, then bass. We have traveled around the Americas and caught salmon, steelhead, ocean fish, and just about everything with these jigs. My wife still ties five days a week. We've employed three ladies from Guatemala to tie for us and one woman in Harrison, Arkansas."

PJ's web page displays 22 standard color patterns, including Sculpin Olive, Peach, and Ginger. "But we tie custom," Hall says. "She'll tie any combination of colors for a special order. We have the bismuth heads, which are a little more expensive. Bismuth is about 83 percent as heavy as lead, so just a little bigger in the same weights, but with a unique fall rate with the added resistance.

"For smallmouths we fish it under a cork, like a float 'n' fly technique," Hall says. "For that we use our Tournament Quality Marabou Jig. The other technique for smallmouths is just reeling it in super slow. Or you can pop-and-drop it, like fishing a spoon for bass. Watching it in a swimming pool, the sudden jerk attracts and the fall is almost always when they strike. The thing about it that makes it so appealing is the marabou itself undulates even when sitting dead still below a bobber on a calm day."

Luke Ronnestrand, a Minnesota muskie guide, ties the Thorne Brothers Hair Jig, which is actually a marabou jig. It's the early season smallmouth jig of choice for Bret Alexander, owner of Alexander's

Sport Fishing Guide Service in Green Bay, just down the shoreline from ground zero of the Canadian Invasion, so he felt the fallout. "It's the best marabou I've ever found," Alexander says. "The way Luke ties it is the key. He uses a lot of marabou and mixes in two stiffer feathers that act like the tail on a kite. It's pretty thick, so his 3/32- and 1/16ounce versions on ballheads work at super-slow speeds. Marabou can be tough to cast, and we have clear water. You need to get out there, so I sometimes put a split shot about a foot ahead of the jig to get more distance on the cast.'

"I started tying jigs six years ago," Ronnestrand says. "Marabou was still a 'secret' at the time. I wanted a thick tie for a slow fall that wasn't hard to keep off bottom on a slow retrieve. I use the Do-it Midwest Finesse Mold. The Finesse jig is wider, and you can get all the thread close behind the head. The material starts moving right behind the head, giving it a more natural profile. And it stands up nice on bottom, making it more efficient."

The 'Bou Game

A marabou jig is tied with down feathers from a turkey—sometimes from a chicken. Feathers provide less resistance than hair or plastic. The same head falls faster when dressed with marabou than with those other materials. So the triggering mechanisms of marabou are different. No material out there compresses, flares, or breathes as quickly or dramatically as marabou when retrieve speed and direction change. Even under a float on a calm day, marabou undulates slightly.

Two of the first notable small-mouth tournament anglers to use those characteristics to best advantage were Dave and Norm Lindsay of Ontario. They used 1/32- to 1/8-ounce jigs designed by Hiram Archibald, a former resort owner and guide on Lake of the Woods. "Our fallback method with small marabou jigs when all else fails," Dave Lindsay once told me. "Size doesn't matter for big bass. You match the size and weight of the jig to the situation."



Captain Bret Alexander starts the season working marabou slow, speeding up and going heavier when water temps increase.



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The Lindsay's often "strolled" with marabou—pulling it 20 to 40 feet behind the boat at just under 1 mph along transitions between rock and sand, using 1/8-ounce jigs in windy conditions, 1/16-ounce on calm days, and even smaller jigs when the fish were off or the bottom was snaggy. "Actively pumping the rod, just swimming the jig along, or dragging all might work," Lindsay says. "On sand, drag all you want. Marabou jigs provide great bottom feel, even with 4- to 6-pound mono. But pitching marabou jigs in a heavy wind can be tough. Smallmouths often lightly inhale these things. Bites can't be felt. On calm days in shallow water, smallmouths can sometimes be seen inhaling the jig without sending any indication back to the angler except the line vibrating briefly on the surface."

"In May and June I go with a 1/8-ounce on Green Bay," Alexander says. "Once water reaches 60°F, you can run heavier weights and speed up a little bit. But in spring, I like a slow, steady reel and an occasional tiny little pop. That often triggers a following fish. I tell clients to retrieve it slowly and if it's tapping bottom speed up a little bit. I think it looks like a leech—just enough movement to look like a leech, but it doesn't look like much coming through the water until you give it that little, one-inch pop with the rod tip. It flares then compresses when the retrieve continues."

Alexander uses the new Daiwa Hair Jig Rods—7-foot 3-inch and 7-foot 6-inch medium-action rods with soft tips. "That whip action gives you better distance," he says. "I like 5-pound-test superlines like Power Pro or Sufix 832 with a 3-foot, 6-pound Sun Line Sniper Fluorocarbon leader tied in with back-to-back uni-knots. I like to keep the knot outside the guides for longer casts. The retrieve is made with the rod tip down and off to the side. I stand sideways, reel slow and steady, and add that quick one-inch wrist pop every 5 or 6 feet. It speeds up, then stops and the marabou puffs out. I do the same thing with bou-tails for muskies, getting the marabou to fluff out at various points during the retrieve."

As so many claim, is marabou only a cold-water solution? "I pitched it all the way through July last year," Alexander says. "For some reason they stopped biting it around the end of July. But in spring and early summer it's almost all I use. About 90 percent of the time anyway. Black is my favorite, or black with purple feathers, then black and brown. I've caught them fairly well on an off-white color with a little brown in it, but if I had to pick just one I'd go with black and purple."

I use 1/16- and 1/8-ounce marabou jigs almost exclusively—sometimes a 1/32-ounce version under a fixed float in place of a 'trollhair' (synthetic hair) jig when fishing float-'n'-fly style. The same dynamic that makes marabou so effective for pitching makes it a great choice under a float—that

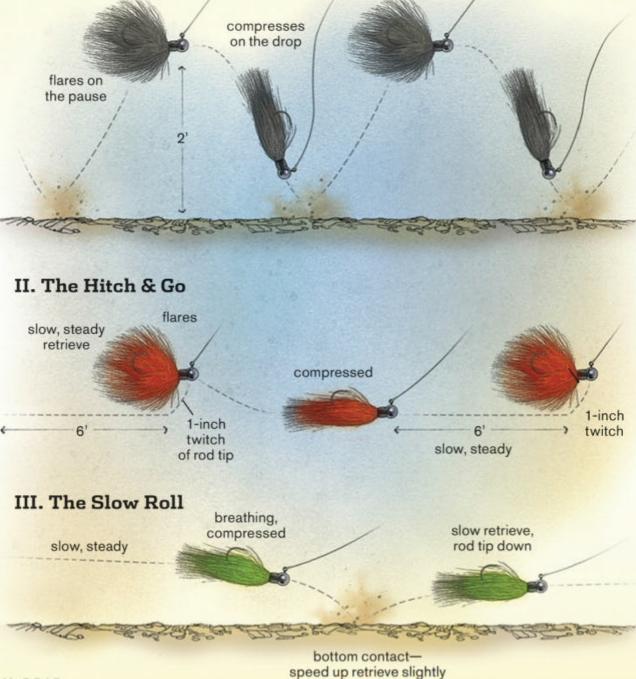
constant expand-contract action which, under a float, is accentuated in anything from a light chop to heavy surf.

Marabou can be used to imitate almost any prey, making it a matchthe-hatch kind of thing, too. We typically use natural colors—black, brown, or olive green when fishing on or near bottom, to imitate sculpins, crustaceans, hellgrammites, and other large insects. A slight splash of purple, orange, yellow, or lime green might be called for, but solid colors work well. When swimming the jig to imitate shiners, we use white, gray, or white with a strand or two of silver tinsel or Flashabou. Exotic colors like chartreuse, red, or lime green can incite bass riots sometimes, but it might be a "one day in ten" thing.

Pyzer has a slightly different take. "Any color of hair works—so

'Bou Moves

I. The Pop & Drop



semi-slack





long as it's black," he says. "Hairjig experts I know carry brown, olive, pumpkin, grey, and silver hair jigs, but they end the day with black—the color they tied on in the morning. For whatever reason, smallmouths simply prefer black marabou. And the best jig weight most days is either 1/16, 3/32, or 1/8 ounce. You want ballhead or mushroom heads and small, sticky-sharp, premium hooks from size 6 up to size 2. But the difference starts with the marabou itself. You want individual, firm, catlike, whisker fibers, not soft, webby material. Archibald said he would carefully inspect dozens of bags of marabou in a tackle shop and not buy any material that wasn't firm enough. If you tie your own jigs, pack twice as many fibers around the head than the sparsely-tied store-bought versions."

VMC Pro Series Marabou Jig

Pyzer adds that too many anglers worry about marabou being too light to cast. "When

»Gord Pyzer says black is his favorite color when it comes to marabou jigs for smallmouths.

PHOTO // GORD PYZER

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soaking wet, marabou becomes heavier," he says. "One of the surprising subtleties of hair jigs is that they're easy to cast when wet, but when they land on the water, they become almost neutrally buoyant, floating like butterflies, stinging like bees. To maximize that effectiveness, use a long rod. I like a 7-foot 6-inch medium-lightto light-power spinning rod that loads quick. Most days you're pitching, often underhanded, to relatively close targets such as the shaded side of a rock or an undercut bank. Once your jig hits the water, be sure not to alter its rate of fall or impart any additional action—it's tantalizing enough all on its own. Over the years, I've noticed this is

"Whether you're casting or pitching hair, experiment with

the hardest thing for most anglers

to learn.

slightly different jig weights and line sizes to adjust the rate of descent according to the depth and water conditions," Pyzer says. » Marabou's magic lies in the triggering mechanisms of its material, the way it compresses, relaxes, and breathes.

"This is where size and type of line comes into play. Day in and day out, the best line for this technique is 4- to 8-pound gel-spun polyethylene, such as FireLine, Sufix 832, or Nano-Fil. I always use back-to-back uni-knots to tie in an 18-inch length of 4- to 8-pound Maxima Ultragreen monofilament, or fluorocarbon in clear water."

Well, at least we're ready this time. For another invasion, that is. Or are we? ■

*In-Fisherman Field Editor Matt
Straw is a smallmouth bass expert,
always field-testing and fine-tuning
presentations to trigger more bites from
bronzebacks.

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LUNKER LURKER.

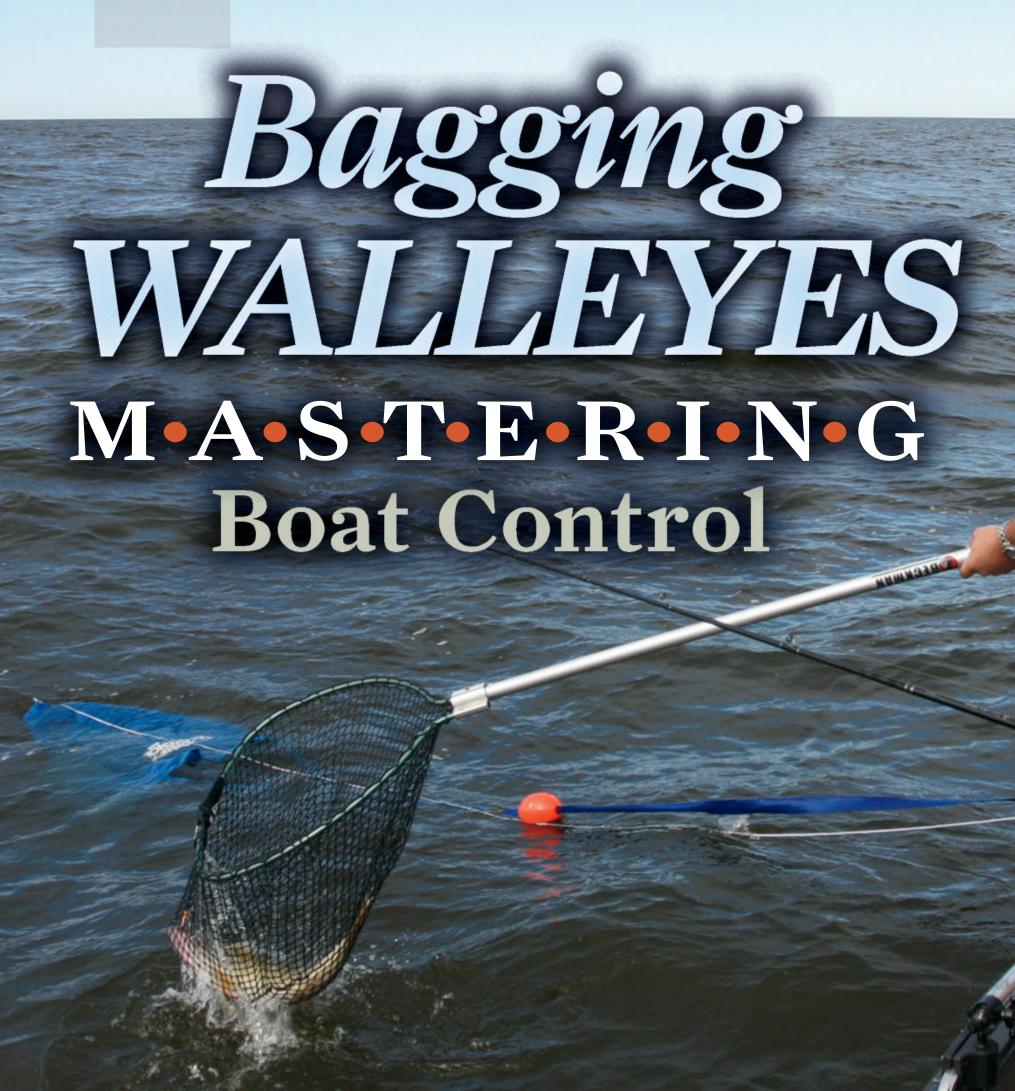


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THE WALLEYE SCENE IS AWASH in new lures, presentational tweaks, and technological breakthroughs. With a sea of hot baits, must-fish tactics, and Space Age electronics at our fingertips, it's easy to gloss over the mundane matter of boat control. ¶ Before someone shouts "b-o-r-i-n-g," let's not forget that all the latest lures, killer techniques, and new honeyholes on the planet won't put fish in your boat if you can't keep your hook in the strike zone at a speed that trips their triggers. ¶ "Things like lure color, size, and action are important, but depth and speed are paramount," says longtime guide Jon Thelen, echoing a few founding principles of In-Fisherman's presentational theory. "And that requires boat control."



While it's a no-brainer on calm days, mastering speed and position becomes far more difficult when wind and waves enter the picture. "It's ironic that as many of our boats have grown larger in recent years, they've also become harder to handle with precision," he says. "Their hulls catch more wind, and the large outboards used to propel them can be hard to dial into precise speeds, or slow down to a crawl." And even small craft can be tough to control in the face of currents, crosswinds, and other confounding factors.

BY DAN JOHNSON*

That explains why Thelen rarely leaves the dock without driftsocks, and a plan for their deployment. A lifetime of chasing wandering 'eyes across the fabled flats, reefs, and other sweet spots of Mille Lacs, Lake of the Woods, and other A-list, bigwater fisheries has taught him a thing or two about using socks as a weapon in the never-ending fight for boat control.



Forward, Slow

One of the simplest driftsock setups is used when you need to slow the boat while forward trolling. "Let's say you want to slow-troll spinners at .8 mph, but it's too rough for the electric motor, and your big motor or kicker can't hit that exact speed," Thelen says. "Drop a 40- to 48-inch driftsock off the bow eye, so it's directly under the center of the boat."

To avoid hanging over the bow in rough conditions, he secures the sock prior to launching his boat. "Tie direct, with no harness buoy," he says. "The sock should run beneath the front of the hull. You sacrifice steering if it runs too far back."

Another advantage of this single-sock setup comes when heavy seas make it difficult to trace a tricky contour with the kicker motor. "Offset to one side of the boat, with a small prop, a kicker often doesn't have the oomph or ability to control a large boat in a strong wind," he says. "A driftsock under the bow allows you to use the main engine, which is much more manageable."

Such a system also reduces the effects of wave surges when trolling with or against the wind. "This can be key, because even though it can be good to vary lure speed with an occasional rod sweep, most crankbaits and spinners aren't designed to constantly start and stop due to wave surges," he says.

Bow-based socks have applications in backtrolling, too. "Depending on boat size, anywhere from a 50- to 72-inch driftsock can help you slow a small tiller to a crawl," he says. "It also makes it possible to backtroll with a big wheelboat with a 250-hp outboard."

The setup is similar to the forward-trolling system, except Thelen adds a harness buoy to the driftsock, then clips that to the bow eye. "Attaching it there offers advantages over a side cleat," he says. "You generate a direct line of resistance, for easier steering. Plus, the line is closer and more parallel to the surface, so the sock stays in the water better."

Socks Sideways

When drifting spinners or Lindy rigs, Thelen turns the boat perpendicular to the wind. Such positioning calls for a double-sock deployment comprised of a large sock astern, and a smaller one at the bow. "Drifting sideways, I run a 60-inch sock off the back cleat, and a 40- to 50-incher on the front," he says, explaining that such a size differential causes the stern sock to act as a pivot point, enabling easier locational adjustments with his bow-mount trolling motor.

"If I'm fishing a drop-off, with the bow over 15 feet and the stern over 20, and I start to drift too deep, I can bump back up the break with the trolling motor—while keeping the boat sideways—a lot easier with this setup than with two socks the same size," he says.

Other particulars include adding extra attachment points— Thelen prefers the Panther Marine Rope Cleat—on both sides of the bow. The left cleat is positioned just behind the trolling motor mounting bracket, while its twin is set back an equal distance from the bow. Advantages include keeping the sock out of the way when fishing, and having more room in the center of the boat for fighting and landing fish.

"Using the factory-installed forward docking cleat puts the driftsock in your way," he says. "I've seen anglers pulling in a sock to get it out of the way when a fish is hooked, but this changes your drift and increases the chances of losing the fish while you're fiddling with your socks."

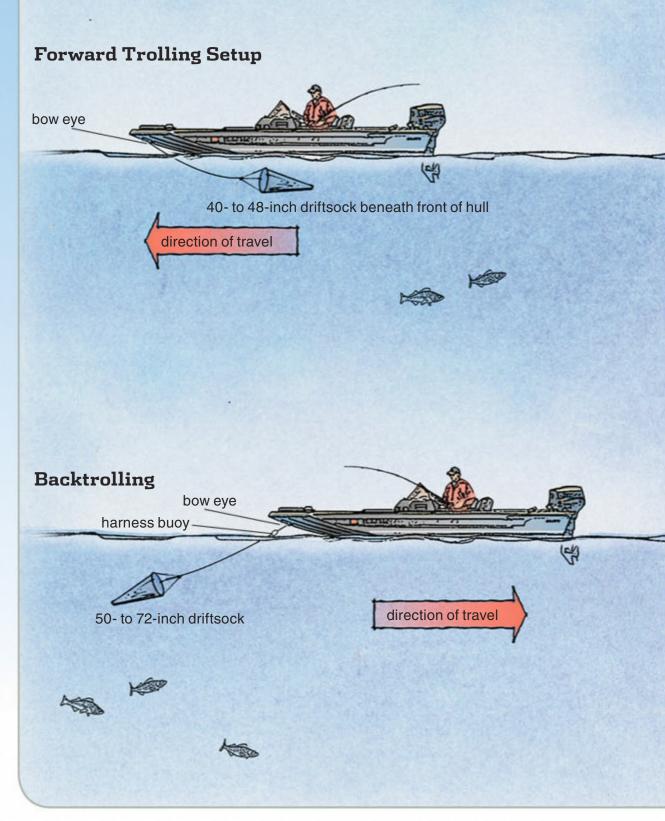
Thelen adds a harness buoy to his rigging when side-drifting, to get the sock away from the boat and improve its performance by reducing the angle at which the lead enters the water. "In large waves, adding 5 or 6 feet of rope between the harness buoy and the cleat further improves performance," he says.

Casting Call

Another scenario where socks excel is when casting a windblown bank. "If you're at the bow, casting into the shallows while using the trolling motor to slowly move

Driftsock Deployment

By creating drag, a driftsock slows boat speed and mitigates wave surges, thus engendering precise speed control and smooth presentations. By attaching socks at different points on the hull, you can tailor boat position in relation to wind, current, structure, or the shoreline.



the boat parallel to it, the wind and waves want to push the stern toward shore," he says. "This can spook fish or even run your lower unit aground."

To keep the back of the boat in line, Thelen hangs a 48- to 60-inch sock off the outside corner. "I bump up the trolling motor to counteract the extra drag, and the sock keeps

the stern from swinging with the wind," he says, noting that a harness buoy is mandatory, but extra rope is optional.

The back-corner setup also makes it easier for electronic navigational aids such as Minn Kota's i-Pilot Link system, which Thelen uses, or MotorGuide's PinpointConnect technology, to follow key contours.

>Stock Sizing

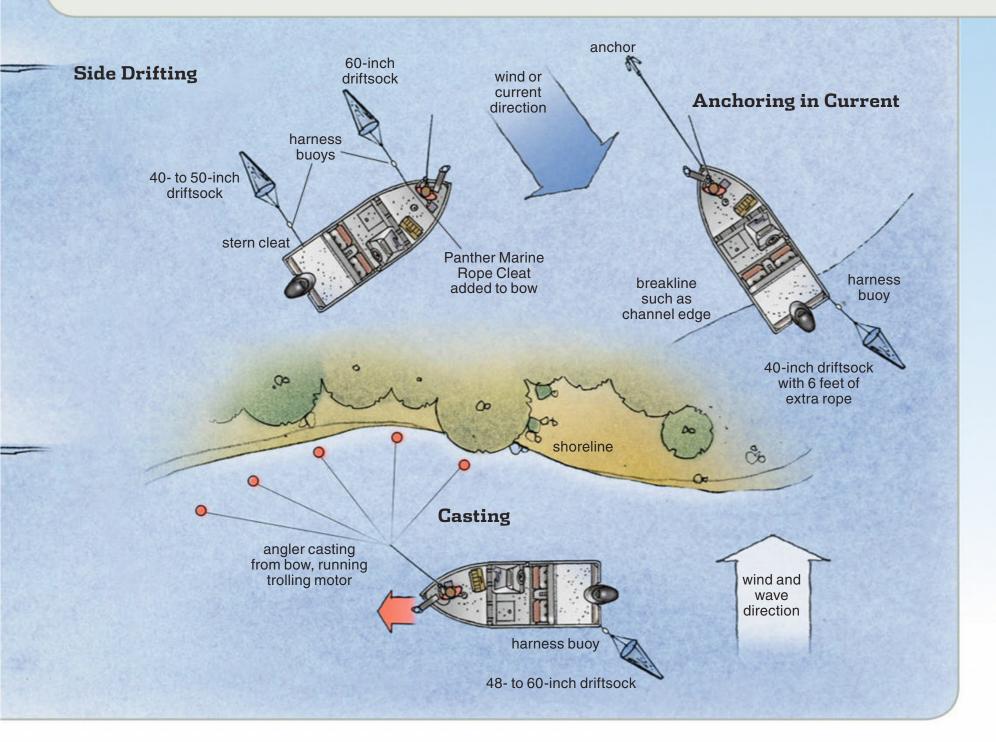
Driftsocks are available in a host of sizes, most of which fall between 18 and 72 inches. Given such ample options, selecting the right sizes for your boat and styles of fishing can be intimidating. Thelen simplifies the process with a few basic rules.

"Boat size and wind conditions are the determining factors," he says. "For boats 14 feet or less, as well as canoes and kayaks, an 18- to 24-inch driftsock is perfect in calm to slightly breezy conditions. Moderate winds require beefing up to 25- to 30-inch sizes, while strong winds call for 36- to 42-inch socks."

When fishing from a larger boat, he applies similar incremental adjustments. "If you're running a 16-to 18-footer, the recommendations are 25- to 30-inch

driftsocks in light breezes, 36- to 42-inch sizes in moderate winds, and 48- to 50-inchers in heavy seas," he says. "With a 19- to 22-foot boat, start with a 36- to 42-inch driftsock in light winds, upgrade to 48- to 50-inchers, then 54- to 72-inch socks as the wind increases."

Thelen's top socks include Lindy's Wave Tamer—a heavy-duty sock featuring a spring-assisted opening for fast deployment. He also favors Drift Control's Magnum and Original series for 40- to 60-inch options, and recommends the company's Fisherman series for socks down to 18 inches. Together, he says, the lineup makes it easy to find a trio of appropriately sized driftsocks for almost any safely fishable situations.



Current Affairs

Socks aren't just for still waters. When anchoring over a channel edge or other current-washed breakline, Thelen drops a 40-inch sock, secured by a harness buoy and 6 feet of additional rope, off either corner astern. "This keeps the current and wind from pushing you up and down the break," he says.

The extra rope is key to prevent the hull from acting as a current break and restricting the flow of water into the sock.

Whatever the driftsock setup, he always adds a dump line, such as the 20-footer Drift Control supplies with its harness buoys. "The line attaches to the end of the bag, so you can quickly get the water out and pull the sock in," he explains. Infinitely easier than wrestling with a full sock, it's one more critical piece of ammunition in Thelen's boat-control arsenal. ■

*Dan Johnson is a frequent contributor to In-Fisherman publications and Public Relations manager for the Union Sportsmen's Alliance.



GIANTI

Trophy pike in the lower 48 have become a rare commodity in recent decades. Enough things have to go just right to grow pike in excess of 45 inches, including good water quality, ample forage base, effective harvest regulations, and catch-and-release of the biggest pike. Even with all these elements in place, giant pike are a challenge to catch, but advice from some of the country's top pike anglers can slant the odds in your favor.

Mille Lacs

Select inland lakes across the country have a history of producing trophy fish of multiple species. Mille Lacs in Central Minnesota is one such lake, and guide Steve Scepaniak has seen pike topping 50 inches from this fabled fishery. He confirms that it harbors plenty of stout 40- to 45-inch pike in the 25-pound range.

Scepaniak focuses his early season attention on cabbage growth in 6 to 10 feet of water. He and his clients use a one-two punch, casting spinnerbaits and dragging sucker minnows. Baits should be big enough to be appealing to large pike but not be so large as to exclude

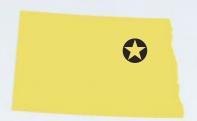
most pike from taking interest. Muskie spinnerbaits with black bucktail and red blades are among his most productive presentations. He tips spinnerbaits with a white curlytail grub. "Most every preyfish species that pike eat in the lake has a white belly, so we replicate that with the trailer," he says. He lets spinnerbaits sink several seconds before starting the retrieve. The trick is to run them just above the tips of new-growth cabbage.

During this same time, suckers are dragged along, suspended under floats. He watches floats closely, and once a pike hits, he puts the reel in free spool and chases the fish with the boat so that it doesn't feel resistance. "We quickly get over the top of the fish and set the hook once it takes its second run," he

says. "By midsummer we're using larger suckers in the 10- to 12-inch range on a quick-strike rig. That eliminates the risk of deeply hooking trophy pike, which we release.

"We use medium-heavy setups

like Abu Garcia 6500 C3 reels spooled with 50-pound Spiderwire Stealth. Heavier gear allows us to target pike tucked in thick cabbage beds in 6 to 15 feet of water. This is prime big-pike territory. It's important to not just work the edge. We fish right through the middle of weedbeds with livebaits set 4 to 5 feet down and let pike come up. Big pike smoke these baits when they're pulled with the trolling motor at speeds up to 0.5 mph. You can add a small Colorado spinner blade in front of the bait for added attraction."



Plains Fisheries

Well known for its jumbo perch and robust walleye population, pike have benefited from constantly rising water levels on Devils Lake

in North Dakota. Submerged vegetation and flooded shorelines have led to successful spawns and excellent recruitment of young pike on a near-annual basis. With more than 250,000 acres of water, young pike are



favorites include Northland's Mimic Minnow, as a paddletail option, and the Kalin's Lunker Grub, with its slightly oversized curly tail for a slower fall rate and more disturbance as it churns through the water.

"In early spring I spend time fishing old road beds. We fish soft plastics in the shallows in 2 feet of water where big fish rest in the heat of the sun, and then work these baits down to the base of the ditch in about 8 feet of water. For big fish, it's important to let the bait hit the bottom. Then swim it forward before letting it pause and fall again. You want to keep it close to bottom even in deeper water as trophy pike typically rest near the bottom early in the season. Watch your line. The take from a big pike can be as subtle as one little jump of the line."

Stealth is another key factor when pursuing early season giants. Above all else, McQuoid fishes away from people. Trophy pike spook easily in shallow water and typically react to the first bait presented to them properly. With 400 miles of shoreline on Devils Lake, finding an uncrowded fishing area isn't difficult. "In areas with calm conditions and clear water, stalking individual pike can be the name of the game," he says. "That means slowly creeping with the trolling motor and having the Minn Kota Talon ready to set anchor when a target fish is spotted. It's critical to not run over fish with the boat or even to

use the Spot-Lock function on the trolling motor because the constant running and adjusting of the motor can cloud the water and disturb fish."

Since most of his customers prefer to cast lures, McQuoid obliges them but is quick to point out the effectiveness of being stationary and soaking baits. "There have been times when bank anglers catch upwards of 50 pike in a day by soaking smelt on the bottom. The presentation is slow, deliberate, and deadly early in the season. For that reason, we occasion-

ally run a big bait rigged on a quick-strike rig off the back of the boat under a float. When big pike refuse to chase a lure, they can often be fooled by the real thing."

When water temperatures warm to 60°F, he switches from small, slow presentations to larger and quicker lures, capitalizing on the increased metabolism and aggressive feeding of pike in summer. He burns 3/4- to 1-ounce Revenge Spinnerbaits rigged with a 4-inch paddletail trailer through the weeds and over the top of rockpiles. Road beds also continue to produce big pike throughout summer. Focus on steep edges and use a run-and-gun approach to cover more area and increase your odds of connecting with trophy fish.

McQuoid says sandy bottom bays with scattered weeds in the 8- to 12-foot depth range are prime spots for jigging summer walleyes, and they also hold big pike. Work Musky Innovations Bull Dawgs and



able to grow quickly on a rich forage base. As pike near 40 inches, they have a diversity of large forage. Perch, walleye, and white bass are all available in good numbers to help grow big pike into giants, as evidenced by a 51.5-incher caught there in 2016.

With a lifetime of experience targeting trophy fish, Aaron McQuoid knows what it takes to catch quality fish on Devils Lake. He relies on fundamentals at the start of the open-water season, taking into consideration that the metabolism of pike is still at a low level when the ice comes off the lake.

He starts the season by focusing on the backs of shallow dark-bottom bays adjacent to spawning marshes. Generally, sheltered areas with increased sun exposure warm more quickly and attract larger fish. Keeping his presentations small and slow, he relies heavily on soft-plastic grubs and swimbaits in the 3- to 4-inch range. His

Swimmin' Dawgs at multiple depths and speeds to match weather conditions and the mood of fish. These lures match the size and bulk of midsummer prey of monster pike.



Western Reservoirs

Will Dykstra has the pulse of western reservoirs like few other anglers do. His top three picks for monster pike are Colorado's Spinney Mountain, Williams Fork, and Stagecoach

reservoirs. These fisheries have the potential for growing pike topping 45 inches and 30 pounds.

What these fisheries lack in protective pike regulations they make up for in a forage base of trout and cool water temperatures throughout the season. Lakes like Spinney now also have a thriving population of illegally

>> Several waters in addition to those discussed here are good opportunities to catch giant pike, including Chequamegon Bay on Lake Superior, the Door County area of Lake Michigan, Lake St. Clair, Thousand Islands area, and Lake of the Woods. Here, Captain Bret Alexander hoists a Green Bay giant, another water with regular catches of notable pike.

introduced perch, which have increased the top-end size potential of pike. Dykstra says that Colorado pike are stout, gorging on high-protein trout. The stocky pike can quickly grow to 42 inches and top 25 pounds, but seldom live beyond 12 to 13 years, unlike some pike in the northern Midwest and Canada that routinely live into their

40

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20s, which at 42 inches often lack the girth to crack the 20-pound mark.

The biggest obstacle to catching trophy prespawn pike on some of Colorado's finest fisheries is that their boat ramps often don't open until May, when personnel become available to staff boatinspection stations. During the Prespawn Period, pike stage in shallow muddy bays accessible only to shoreline, kayak, and float-tube anglers. Slow presentations, such as fly fishing with large streamers, or casting extra-large Zoom Flukes and Duo Realis 120 suspending jerkbaits, get the job done for lethargic prespawn pike.

If fishing boatless isn't to your liking, Dykstra suggests getting to Spinney Mountain Reservoir as soon as it's ice free and open to boat traffic. Here,

he trolls shallow-running minnowbaits adjacent to spawning bays. He trolls at 0.8 to 0.9 mph and increases stealth by spreading lines out away from the boat with planer boards. He spools Okuma line-counter reels with 10-pound-test monofilament and ties directly to lures with a clinch knot.

"Bites decrease in early spring if we use a leader, and I prefer the subtler action that tying direct affords," he says. Productive lures include long slender minnowbaits that resemble juvenile pike, such as the Savage Gear Sandeel Jerk Minnow, Rapala F-18, and Yellow Bird Minnows. At trolling speeds of less than 1 mph, these lures have little action, especially the Sandeel. That's the magic of this lure for Dykstra. "With its tiny diving lip, I can dial in on the strike zone with the Sandeel to 3.5 to 4 feet below the surface," he says. "At this time of year, less lure action equals more action from fish. The Sandeel, actually designed for casting, is my most productive early season trolling lure."

During high-water years, Dykstra looks forward to a phenomenal topwater bite on select fisheries. During years with sufficient runoff, shoreline vegetation is inundated by several feet of water. Big pike take advantage of the warm water, shelter, and feeding opportunities this flooded cover provides. Working topwater frogs through this heavy cover is among the most exhilarating tactics for giant pike. He says it's not uncommon to have days where 50 to 60 pike in the 36- to 44-inch range are spotted cruising the shoreline. The trick is getting them to bite and extracting them from the cover. Hollow-bodied frogs like the Livetarget Frog and Savage Gear 3D Frog are great for triggering bites when there's a slight chop on the water and you get up closer and make short flips to cover. These lures come through cover like no others.

When fishing clear water in calm conditions, longer casts to cover become critical. Switch from hollow-bodied frogs to hard-bodied jumping frogs. Lures such as the MegaFrox American Bullfrog have a natural walking action and generate a splashing commotion on a straight retrieve that calls fish to the surface. They're compact and cast well, and sit firmly down in the water. Pike rush in from behind to strike them. A flared living-rubber



>> Will Dykstra says that ample forage such as trout and cool water temperatures fuel growth of pike in Colorado reservoirs.

skirt at the back of the bait adds appeal during the pause. Fish these frog baits on a 40-pound-test fluorocarbon leader tied to 40- to 50-pound braid mainline

When thick midsummer vegetation limits trolling, Dykstra counts on buzzbaits and prop baits for giant pike. He recommends stocking up on several different styles and brands of prop baits. Each has its own unique sound. While he favors heavy cupped blades that deliver a deeper sound, he's observed that pike on different fisheries have distinct lure preferences. On some lakes, the Whopper Plopper is the ticket. In other places, pike favor a clacking or different plopping noise.

New plopper-style options to try include the Savage Gear Pike Smash Tail and Berkley Choppo. These lures have a long cylindrical body, a rotating rear tail, and two treble hooks. Where vegetation grows to the surface, a buzzbait-style lure such as the MegaFrox Slash Duck comes through cover easier. The Slash Duck is of heavy construction, with a front metal buzz-blade, a solid frog body for weight and balance during the cast, and a living-rubber skirt in front of a stout 5/0 Owner single hook. You can work these lures at multiple speeds to produce different noises and splashing actions. Earlier in the season, prop baits and buzzbaits perform best toward the end of the day when pike have become more active. By midsummer, they work well any time of the day, including first light, when a slow retrieve is best.

Recent high-water years have helped pike populations rebound across much of the country. This bodes well for many historic big-pike factories, including the Great Lakes. Areas such as Chequamegon Bay on Lake Superior, the Door County waters of Lake Michigan, Lake St. Clair, and the Thousand Islands area of Lake Ontario all have the potential to produce monster pike and are currently experiencing higher catch-rates of big pike. Dykstra's trolling techniques work on any bigwater fishery, while McQuoid and Scepaniak's tactics work well for fishing cover and incorporating livebait into your trophy pike pursuits.

^{*}In-Fisherman Field Editor Steve Ryan, multispecies expert and writer for all In-Fisherman publications, is based in the Chicago area.



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FIELD NOTES-

Crappies on the Spawn



Capt. Dave Snellings watched

his surface-temperature gauge as we eased from the dock in Maryland's Piscataway Creek, a Potomac River tributary a few miles downriver from Washington, D.C. It was the first day of April, but a prolonged March cold spell had crappies that had been ready to move shallow in a deep funk. We were optimistic, though, as we cleared the green buoy and opened up, heading to a proven spawning area. The day promised light winds and highs in the low-70°F range.

"We have water temperature at about 57°F right now," Snellings said. "I'm hoping the afternoon sun pushes the water in coves to that magical 60°F mark. That should stir bigger males to move shallow and turn on. The tide's coming in (the Potomac is a tidal river) and everything looks perfect. We should have a memorable trip."

Snellings has been a guide for Indian Head Charters, in Central Maryland, for many years. He and Captain Mike Starrett target crappies from

>> The author with an early season slab.

late March through early May. Water temperature is key to triggering a good early bite and reading the bite as the season continues. It's noteworthy that early fish often are the biggest fish of the spawning season.

Snelling and Starrett use their version of spider-rigging to get on fish. Set port and starboard, bow and transom, three-way rod holders spread 12 telescoping poles, 14 or 16 feet long. An angler is responsible for three poles, each baited with a 3- to 4-inch shiner minnow suspended at varying depths below a float. The line to each pole is 30-pound braid with a short leader of clear 12-pound monofilament and a #2 or #4 gold Aberdeen hook. This rigging saves on tackle and re-rig-

ging time as the hooks can be straightened, retrieved, and bent back into shape when snagged. A lead shot a foot above the minnow keeps it lively to attract crappies in turbid or tannin-stained water, yet anchored enough so it can't get away.

Using a remote-controlled trolling motor to ease in and around shallow woody shorelines, we cover water quietly and efficiently to find fish. Corks dip here and there as we boat 12- to 15-inch fish. As the water temperature nudges to 60°F, more and more of the corks disappear, just as Snellings had predicted. Prespawn crappies are transitioning from a staging phase and moving up



onto gravel shorelines to feed. A bit later in the cycle—perhaps a week or more hence—they would push even shallower to spawn.

Govering a lot of water via spider-rigging often keys finding crappies on big waters. In northwestern Pennsylvania, 13,000acre Pymatuning Reservoir is a huge, flatland reservoir that offers multiple habitats. In the north, stump-filled flats near Linesville attract black crappies in early to mid-May, where they hold 6- to 10-feet deep. During the 2014 and 2016 Pennsylvania Crappie Camp, I fished with local crappie expert Kenneth Smith, of Sharon, Pennsylvania. He introduced me to his "hang gliding" technique for catching big fish.

He uses 8- to 9-foot light-power and moderate-action spinning rods and spinning reels with 6or 8-pound Optic Yellow Gamma Poly Flex line. He rigs a pair of 1/8ounce jigs 18 to 24 inches apart, each jig dressed with a Bobby Garland Baby Shad body, color depending on

Jig Size—How Small Is Too Small?

In many situations, larger jigs attract bigger crappies while smaller jigs get the attention of modest bluegills and yellow perch. But there are times when big crappies key on smaller food and tiny jigs work best.

That's the case when male crappies are visible in shallow water guarding nests or holding stationary and feeding before they start spawning. In this situation, less usually says more or says it better and triggers more fish overall. That's because tiny jigs can be fished most effectively, as they dart and swim realistically, without sinking too fast, dangled at the end of a long rod and 4-pound monofilament line.

Small tidbits also make it more difficult for crappies to make out the exact nature of the trick you're presenting to them.

Keeping records the last five years, 80 percent my big fish—13 to almost 16 inches—bit a 1/64- or 1/80-ounce hair jig or a bare jig dressed with bait or a tiny softbait body. It's all about stealth and a soft entry into the water near the fish—and lure action after the fact. With tiny jigs it also helps to bend the end of the hook shank out a bit to open the gap to help the hook catch hold and set into the upper jaw or roof of a fish's mouth.

water clarity—bright colors in dingy water, natural patterns in clearer water.

After finding a school of crappies, he positions the boat perpendicular to and upwind from the fish. He sets rods in rod holders, rod tips a foot above the surface, lures at different depths to intercept fish as he "glides" through the school with the wind at his back. Each angler fishes three rods—one rod suspends the jig

combos with a bobber while the other two drift freely. The fish were aggressive at times, often snapping the rod tip down to the surface.

Smith favors tipping his lures with Berkley Crappie Nibbles, experimenting with colors, ranging from bright chartreuse to orange. Many of our fish exceed a pound and we have several that are almost twice that. He says the ideal water temperature for his gliding technique ranges from 60°F to 64°F, and it also works at nearby Shenango River Reservoir and at Ohio's Mosquito Lake, where big white crappies suspend on midlake humps before venturing shallow to spawn.

Closer to my home in Central Maryland, the record rainfall of 2018 had water levels high with dingy clarity during our prime crappie spawning months of April and May. High, turbid water can have positive and negative effects on the Spawn Period. Flooded vegetation and brush draw bedding fish tight to the banks, but dingy water makes it difficult to see them—yet it also



makes it easier to get in closer to the fish without spooking them.

Heavy precipitation also makes crappies hold longer in deeper water adjacent to shallow spawning territory before they move up. When the water warms and clears, spawning resumes or begins, sometimes at a frantic pace. Water temperature spiked during the first week of May and anglers hustled to play catch-up with fish move-

ments. There was a short window for finding shallow fish.

A more predictable pattern of fish movement emerged on other waters. I fished with Maryland DNR Officer Andrew Shifflett, an angler who also tracks crappies in the central part of the state. His work puts him close to the action during patrols of popular panfish lakes, so he knew that the crappie spawn at Piney Run Lake was in full swing.

After a five-day span of 85°F weather, water temperatures in the

>> Spring water levels and water clarity often dictate location of early season crappies and timing of spawning movements.

Water Temperatures & Spawning Tendencies

By In-Fisherman

Immediately after ice-out, crappies seek warming water in bays, canals, and channels in a natural lake, or backwater areas in reservoirs. This initial shallow movement is a feeding response, not a prespawn movement. Many good ice-out locations are poor crappie spawning areas. Crappies usually vacate such areas in favor of prespawn-spawn locations by the time water temperature in backwaters reaches 60°F.

By the time water temperature ranges from about 56°F to 60°F, crappies begin true prespawn movements; that is, fish location is directly affected by where they will be spawning in a week or two. This period is marked by scattered fish. Groups may hold off the first breakline in deeper water at night or during periods of falling water temperature. Under stable weather and rising water temperature, crappies move onto flats and move into banks of hardstem rushes with firm marl bottoms. Spawning areas are protected from wind. The interior of big banks of hardstem rushes is protected enough to eventually gather groups of spawning crappies.

Nest building by male crappies usually begins as water temperature reaches 65°F. Groups of males move into areas in rush beds or stumpfields and establish general spawning territories. As many as 50 males may be building nests in a general area. By this time, males have turned distinctively black. Females, holding on the perimeter of spawning areas, darken, but never get as dark as males. Females are rotund—bloated with ripe eggs.

Within the larger territory, males sweep nests over firm bottom consisting preferably of marl or gravel. Sand is not a preferred bottom type, but is used in many lakes. Nests are 8 to 12 inches in diameter and tend to be circular or oblong. Crappie nests lack the distinctive perfect circular pattern of bass and bluegill nests, and rarely feature a distinct rim, making them more difficult to distinguish.

shallows spiked to 70°F, prime for spawning fish. Three-hundred-acre Piney Run offers limited options with day-use restrictions and electric-motor-only regulations. We made plans to fish the lake with our kay-aks, targeting the abundant shoreline woodcover and beaver huts.

It was one of those rare days when the stars in the crappie universe align. Crappies dressed in their black tuxedo spawning colors were shallow near submerged woodcover. When we found fish, we anchored a short cast away and pitched 1/16-ounce hair jigs or jigs dressed with a softbait body, catching fish after fish.

Predictably, after catching several fish, the rest of the group would become skittish, so we'd wait about five minutes before fishing again. At that point, switching to a different jig color often resulted in a few more fish. Also, try scaling down to a 1/64-ounce jig suspended below a small PlastiLite float. As a matter of stealth, let the wind drift the lure to the fish. Many times, switching to a smaller offering gets additional strikes. Overall, the combination of kayaks, polarized glasses, tiny hair jigs, and ideal conditions resulted in some of the best fishing of the season.

Oftentimes crappies spawn so shallow and are so skittish that extreme stealth is necessary to catch them. Shifflett and I encountered this last spring, as dark guardian males pushed into flooded willows at one of his favorite waters. The warmer temperatures also created an algae bloom that was a two-edged sword. It made fish difficult to see, but also at times allowed us to get in close, where we waited for wind to move patches of the green-surface stuff, allowing us to momentarily spot fish. Again, close-quarters combat with crappies causes a ruckus, so we often rested spots before fishing again. Again, switching jig colors helps trigger a few more fish, as does downsizing jigs.

Some of the largest crappies we have taken the past several seasons are from small, public waters that have rocky dam faces. The connected banks along northern shorelines draw crappies into water as shallow as 12 inches. Sometimes the fish tuck under lipped (undercut) banks. These fish are difficult to spot, so sometimes it's best to systematically work jigs slowly along the bank. When fish can be seen, the same guerilla-style

tactics highlighted previously are needed to tempt them from their territorial claims. Cloudy days seem best at these waters, although it makes it difficult to see fish.

So, I share a few notes from the seasons passing as we head into prime time for this year. The spawning season, which encompasses prespawn, spawning, and postspawn fish, is a magical time of year. Crappies hold deeper to begin, typically move in and out a few times, before staying shallow to spawn during prime time. Then they finally move back out again, which brings us to yet another part of the season—and a story for another day.

The fundamentals for finding and catching crappies are similar across the range of waters where they're found. Stealth often is required when fish move shallow, and it pays to have on hand a selection of smaller jigs for particularly difficult situations.

Keep it simple, have fun, and catch some fish. Release the big ones—there should be plentiful smaller- to medium-sized fish for delicious meals.

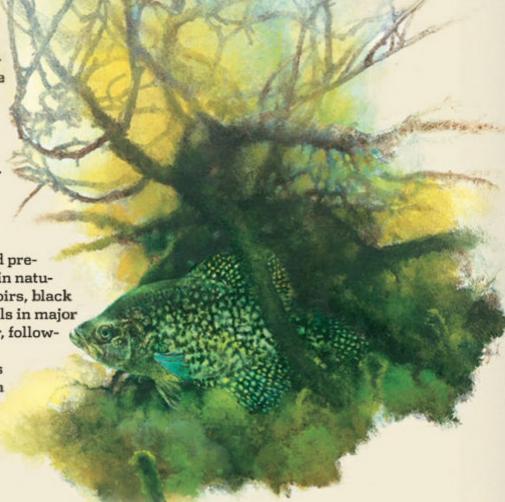
*Jim Gronaw, Westminster, Maryland, is a panfish aficionado and long-time contributor to In-Fisherman publications.

Spawning activity may occur from 65°F to 75°F, but usually peaks at about 70°F. Females filter into general spawning territories. As a female approaches the specific spawning area of a male, an individual male herds the female into his territory and eventually over his nest to release eggs. The male immediately fertilizes them.

A female often moves on and is driven over another nest as she enters the territory of another male. Females may frequent many nests by the time their eggs are spent. Multi-nest spawning ensures continued genetic diversity within populations and helps to ensure that at least some eggs hatch.

Spawning concludes as females move to postspawn and presummer-summer positions near cover along drop-offs in natural lakes. Weedgrowth usually keys fish location. In reservoirs, black crappies move to brush or timber cover along creek channels in major creek arms. White crappies are likely to roam in open water, following shad schools.

Males guard nests, fanning them frequently to keep eggs oxygenated until they hatch, then filter deeper to group with females. Fry feed on zooplankton in the shallows, but eventually move to open water where they drift for the first summer, continuing to feed on zooplankton. Spawning is completed for another year.





Getting personal with potential waters can take a fair amount of legwork and a sense of exploration, to discover an overlooked hotspot you might come to call your own.

The connectedness of streams and rivers and the channel catfishes' remarkable ability to move long distances are what make some streams, often far separated from a larger river, good spots to find catfish. *In-Fisherman* Editor In Chief Doug Stange has written about his spring-through-summer catfish exploits in small Iowa streams, with some prime spots far up a watershed 100 miles or more from a river the size most

anglers would call good catfish water. One of his most productive streams was just 8 to 10 feet across and no deeper than 3 feet, in places.

Small rivers and streams can support self-sustaining populations of channel catfish if suitable habitat exists for the fish's year-round needs—food, cover, suitable flows, good water quality, and overwintering sites. Other streams provide a seasonal home to catfish from spring

Small Rivers and

into summer. Some catfish populations migrate long distances from larger rivers to smaller tributaries to reach ideal spawning habitat, which is often more available in tributarfish remain in smaller waters to feed them downstream to more comfortable environments.

Stream Catfish Science

Greg Gelwicks, Interior Rivers and Streams Research Biologist key River coincided with warming for the Iowa Department of Natu- periods. "Catfish returned to the ral Resources, has studied channel Turkey when water temperatures catfish in small rivers and streams warmed from about the mid-40°F extensively. He evaluated smaller to the 60°F range," Gelwicks says. flowing waters as habitats for sev- "One year it warmed up early, and eral gamefish including channel cat- catfish began moving up the Turkey fish, which involved pinpointing in March. Then a cold snap hit and movements using radiotelemetry. they moved back out to the Missis-His findings on two small rivers in sippi. In early to mid-April there was northeastern Iowa, the Turkey and a sharp warming trend into the midthe Wapsipinicon, reveal that habitat 50°F range, and catfish went up the plays a key role in the seasonal use Turkey again and stayed there." of these systems by channel catfish.

on the lower reach of this system, good from spring through summer, between its confluence with the Mis- but residence year-round is limited

BY ROB NEUMANN

ies than in bigger rivers. Some cat- upstream. All of the catfish tagged in the Turkey moved 28 to 35 miles until water levels drop too low in to the Mississippi each fall from Sepmid- to late summer, or until drop- tember to November, where they ping water temperatures in fall send stayed throughout the winter. Catfish returned to the Turkey River each spring to spawn and remained in positions near their initial tagging locations throughout summer.

Spring movement into the Tur-

The Turkey River is an example The Turkey River study focused of a stream where catfishing can be sissippi River and a dam 40 miles by the lack of overwintering habitat.

"All depths recorded in the Turkey River study were less than 6 feet. A few deeper pools were found in the lowermost areas of the study reach, but the primary wintering location was the Mississippi River," he says.

Gelwicks also tracked catfish in the Wapsipinicon River within a 15-mile stretch bounded by lowhead dams. The Wapsipinicon findings show that whether or not a stream section sustains channel catfish year-round—especially those isolated from a larger river—depends on the availability of wintering habitat. "In the Wapsi, all catfish overwintered in a single hole about 20 feet in depth. It's an old sandpit that provides the only suitable wintering habitat in that stretch. In spring, catfish left that hole and spread back out throughout the 15-mile stretch," he says. Gelwicks describes a good hole as being at least 10 feet deep, with enough current to keep the water oxygenated.

In an article by Dan Anderson in In-Fisherman Catfish In-Sider Guide, Gelwicks notes that many small streams throughout Iowa hold substantial numbers of good-sized catfish in summer, an observation he based on electrofishing surveys.



Many of these wadeable tributaries have maximum depths in pools of just a few feet. "Some streams, especially in the southern Iowa Drift Plain, contain a high density of catfish," he says. "Where we see high densities, they're typically slowgrowing and run a bit smaller, likely because of competition."

Gelwicks notes that without barriers to movement, channel catfish in spring move up into smaller streams, where anglers can tangle with numbers of them through mid-summer. "Typically by the end of July, flows decline, water levels start dropping, and the largest catfish move out," he says. "These streams continue as good nursery areas for young-of-the-year catfish, because of good forage and lack of predators. We've

sampled young-of-the-year flatheads in these streams, too, indicating that some flatheads move up, as well."

In Missouri, adult channel catfish have been found to inhabit smaller tributaries into early fall, suggesting that these environments provide suitable habitat throughout the growing season. While at the University of Missouri, Dr. Jason Vokoun sampled catfish with hoop nets in northeastern Missouri's Grand River—a tributary of the Missouri River—as well as in two smaller tributaries of the Grand, Big Creek, and Yellow Creek. Yellow Creek is about 15 feet wide, while Big Creek is about twice that width.

Adult channel catfish dispersed throughout the mainstem Grand and its tributaries in June. Samples showed adult catfish remaining in tributaries into October, after which they moved downstream again to overwinter in the mainstem Grand, primarily in scour holes that form around bridge support structures.

Identifying Potential Spots

Good maps can help narrow the search for streams that have potential for good catfishing. Starting at the main river, you can track streams up the drainage from the primary tributaries off a main river, then into secondary tributaries, and so on up the drainage.

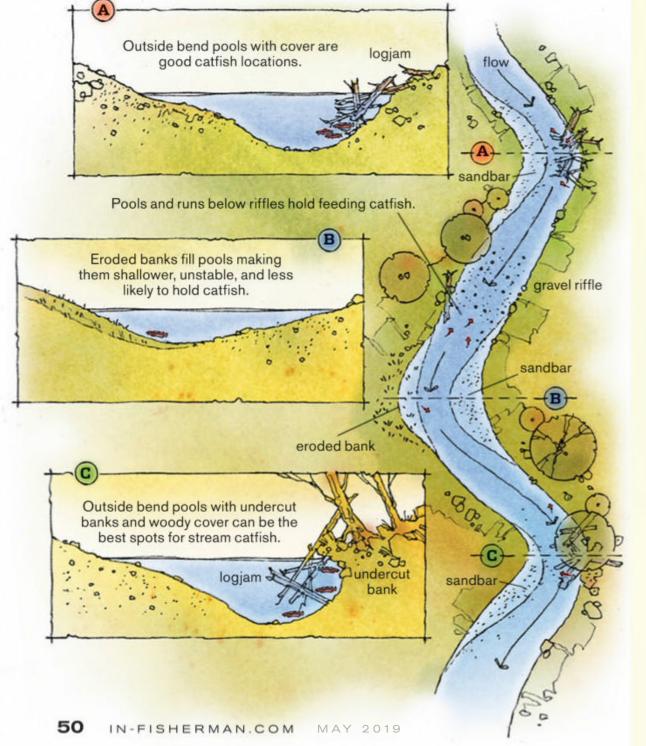
Maps don't replace on-the-ground reconnaissance or word-of-mouth from reliable sources, but they can provide clues as to which locations are accessible and likely worth a visit. U.S.G.S. topographic maps are a great resource, showing streams and rivers, unimproved roads, dams, elevation, and more—things you might not find on a typical roadmap.

In the search for small-stream catfish, Gelwicks highlights the importance of connectivity. If there aren't barriers to catfish movement and there's enough water, channel cats can continue to move up into tributaries in search of spawning sites and later for summer habitats. In some systems they may only move as far as the lower reaches of primary tributaries, but where connectivity and habitat allow, or where a source population exists farther up in the drainage, catfish may be found well up into the farthest reaches of these systems.

Just as important as connectivity is habitat at the scale of a stream "reach"—the dominant habitat characteristics over a longer stretch of stream. You might identify a potentially productive reach on a map, but a visit reveals poor habitat and far less chance for good catfishing. In a study of catfish populations in Iowa rivers and streams, biologist Vaughn Paragamian noted that catfish abundance was keyed to habitat quality. He found the best stream reaches for both numbers and sizes of catfish offered a variety of depths, sufficient cover, and variations in current.

In Paragamian's study, woody cover in the form of brushpiles, fallen trees, rootwads, and logjams were

Anatomy of a Catfish Stream





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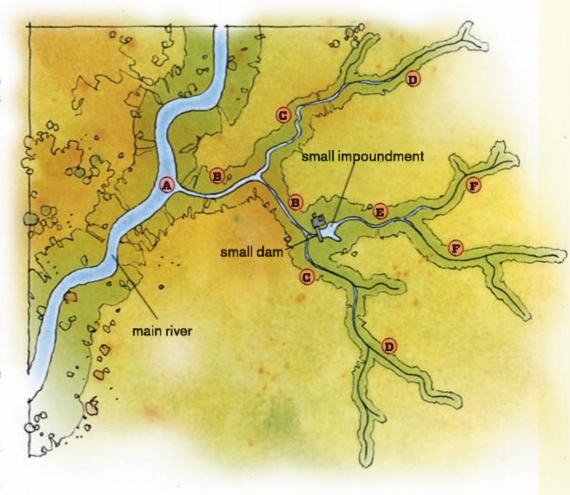


>Potential Catfish Streams

In this sample drainage system, channel catfish are likely to be found in the main river (A) year-round, although in spring a large contingent is likely to move into the primary tributary river (B) during early Prespawn. The primary tributary (B) may support a year-round population of resident catfish if it contains suitable overwintering habitat. Lacking wintering habitat, catfish vacate streams and spend winter in the main river.

Channel catfish are likely to move into secondary tributaries (C) in search of spawning areas and can remain there through summer if suitable flows persist. If flow and spawning habitat are adequate, catfish may move into upper sections of secondary and perhaps tertiary tributaries (D). These smallest tributaries often suffer intermittent flow or low water in mid- to late summer, forcing catfish to vacate.

A dam blocks movement of catfish from the lower river into the upper sections of the drainage system. Catfish may be present in streams above the dam (E and F) if the impoundment or the primary stream feeding it provides year-round habitat needs. The area immediately downstream of the dam is a good spot to find congregating catfish during their upstream migration in spring-



most important in streams that lacked rocky substrates, but woody cover was beneficial in all catfish streams. Catfish abundance was lower in channelized reaches, which lack habitat diversity and cover. Search instead for reaches that contain a good mix of deeper pools and riffles, which provide a broad spectrum of habitats and variations in current.

Cover Water to Find Catfish

Whether you're floating a navigable stream or wading, plan on fishing a fairly lengthy reach to find the best spots. You might get the urge to park yourself in a lawn chair under a shady bridge where you'll likely catch a couple of cats, but more could be had.

Cover a mile or two of water and fish from spot to spot, as you evaluate the different kinds of habitats the stream reach provides. If it's not panning out, you might retreat to another stream or continue fishing another mile, perhaps at another access point. Sooner or later you develop a good sense of a stream's overall potential.

Good spots to find stream cats spring into summer are pools that contain woody cover. Current deflects against outside bends and scours sediments, especially when flow is high in spring, creating some of the best spots to find catfish. As flows recede in summer, these pools are quiet spots that attract both resting and feeding catfish. Pools can also form below riffles, around bridge pilings, and some exist as former sandpits.

You don't need to equate a good early-season pool with a good wintering pool. A good one in spring and summer might be of only moderate depth, depending on what the stream has to offer. In the Turkey River that Gelwicks studied, channel cats were found most frequently in 2 to 4 feet of water, areas substantially shallower than wintering spots. So, in many smaller catfish streams, a good pool might be only waist-deep.

Certain types of woody cover can be better than others, as can the amount and location of wood. Snags made up of several good-sized logs are generally preferred over a single log or treetop with a few wispy branches. Cover in the faster current near the head of a hole is typically a good place to find feeding cats, while cover in quiet water at the lower end of a hole is mostly resting territory. Cover spots located at the heads and cores of holes are often the best places to fish.

Although channel catfish can live in areas of zero current, the best pools tend to have some flow. Catfish tend to avoid more isolated and stagnant pools, which can suffer localized dissolved-oxygen deficits.

Because outside bends bear the brunt of current in high water, they're also zones of high erosion, often leading to sloughing where banks aren't stabilized by terrestrial vegetation. Erosion is more prominent around areas with bank disturbance, such as where livestock can access streams or where stream bank vegetation has been cleared. Holes in these areas tend to be less defined with more unstable sediments. Although snags can accumulate along these bends, they typically don't hold as many catfish as those found on outside ends with healthy banks.

Root systems of trees, brush, and other forms of vegetation help bind soils on stream banks and can lead to the formation of undercut banks. Water scours soil underneath root systems, forming a well-defined



"Find a good catfish spot and you'll likely catch a few. When the action slows, explore for more catfish at similar spots upstream or downstream.

pool that's cut under a bank, and cutbank areas that house log complexes can be some of the best catfish spots of all.

Rigging Up

Small-water catfishing is a simple operation requiring minimal tackle and just a few supplies. Most stream cat duty can be accomplished with 7- to 7.5-foot mediumpower spinning or casting setup with 8- to 12-pound-test monofilament. When wading, a small shoulder bag is helpful for carrying supplies: extra hooks, floats, weights, pliers, sunscreen, a bait knife, bug repellent, bait, a stringer, and maybe lunch. Because of briars, ticks, and poison ivy, long pants are a good idea for trailblazing on stream banks.



A splitshot rig with one or two shot pinched on the line about a foot above the hook works well slowly drifting baits along snags and cutbanks. A sliprig with a slightly larger egg or no-roll sinker is a good choice when you want to keep your bait pinned in likely catfish locations. Most times you won't

need more that a 2-ounce sinker in the swiftest water in small streams

Streams are dandy places to fish float rigs, too, where you can slowly drift baits off bottom along logjams, cutbanks, through runs, and mid-channel pools. For baits, you usually can't go wrong with small chunks of cutbait or small, freshly killed baitfish. The same goes for a gob of worms. Crickets, grasshoppers, and frogs are other options.

In the end, there's something therapeutic about getting personal with small rivers and streams and the catfish that live there. Most times you have solitude, watching, listening, and

feeling the waters as they roll by, sand and gravel shifting underfoot, all the while contemplating the intricacies of streamflow. A twig floats along, every so often twisting in a eddy then gliding on its way, turning again before it lands. Could be a catfish there.

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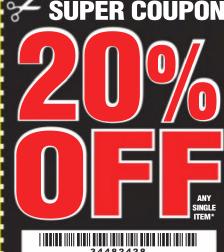
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North with Doc

Gulls! Gills! Girls?

"Why not?" the kid said.

"Just because," the attorney said.

"It simply isn't done," the banker said.

"Sounds like trouble to me," the policeman said.

"I suggested it about 1985," I said, "and all I got was stink eyes from all of you."

"Except from me," the kid said. "I was in diapers back then."

Doc returned from the little boys' room to find us scowling at each other. He said, "What's this all about?" "Women," I said.

"Ahh. One of my favorite subjects," Doc said.

"Specifically, asking our women to join our fishing trips," the banker said.

"Uh-oh," Doc said. "Didn't we settle this a long time ago?"

"We talked about it," the policeman said, "but we took it off the table before a decision was made."

"Maybe we should take another look," the attorney said. "Women have changed a lot the last few decades."

"I disrespectfully disagree with that ridiculous statement," the kid said.

"Excuse me?"

"If anyone changed it is you guys finally evolving to accept females as equals," the kid said.

"Good point," the policeman said, "but instead of us actually changing by our self-ish selves, I think our wives and kids had a lot to do with it."

"Too true," the banker said. "They dragged me kicking and screaming into the 20th century."

"And here it's the 21st, and you're still kicking," the kid said.

"Old habits die hard," Doc said. "A barefoot and pregnant comment these days would get my nose flattened."

"Welcome to the real world, Doc," the kid said. "My girlfriend makes twice what I do. She deserves to be successful just like anyone else."

"Okay, I get that," the banker said. "But we are talking about sharing our traditionally male experience with our spouses."

"My wife would rather go shopping for a week and buy nothing," the attorney said, "than sit in a boat with me for 10 minutes."

"Sounds familiar," the policeman said. "I've taken my honey out on the lake a few times, and she considers fishing to be much like me watching old Westerns. She can't quite understand why anyone would do either."

"Mine is the opposite," I said. "She has always enjoyed the actual pursuit and catching of fish, but doesn't care much for the before and after."

"The prep and the clean-up?"

"Bingo."

"I think we can agree that wetting a line is infinitely more fun than swabbing out a pike-slimed boat," the attorney said.

"So are we suggesting that next year's trip to Canada is a mixed doubles event?" Doc said.

"Why not?" the kid said. "A piscatory pro-am. I think it would be a blast."

Doc said, "Maybe I should ask Aunt Lucy to join us."

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

"Point taken," Doc said.

"We aren't the first group to consider this," I said. "Why don't I call Knobby, and see how coed fishing has worked out at his place?"

"Good idea," Doc said. "In the meantime, can I interest anyone in pickled pigs feet, adult refreshments, and a hand or two of cutthroat pitch?"





"Oh, sure," the banker said. "Our ladies will fit right into this mess."

It was late April. We were gathered at Doc's house to plan the menu and travel logistics for our annual June run to Northwest Ontario.

I leaned against a towering oak out back, and punched up a familiar number on my cell.

"Knobby's Fly-in Fishing. Welcome to Paradise."

"Hey, Knobby, its me again."

"I saw the caller ID," he said. "Good to hear from you. What's up?"

"There has been talk about inviting our spouses to join us on one of your lakes. What's your experience been with that sort of thing?"

"For the most part, they will have a great time," Knobby said. "But there are a few things I can suggest."

"Go ahead."

"It works best when the women are spouses. Long-time girlfriends are okay, but its better the other women know them very well before the trip."

"Good point," I said. "What else?"

"While some mixed parties stay for a week, that is a heavy burden for first-timers. I suggest two or three days for the inaugural outing."

"Even if a lady hated to fish, I suppose she could stand it for a few days."

"Exactly," Knobby said. "Or come prepared with something to do other than fish. Some women visitors like to sit in the boat and read. Others are big into photography, and I even had one female guest who did watercolor paintings. And very good ones, too."

"Seems a shame to come all that way and not fish," I said. "But I assume it's the same as enjoying only the beach in Cozumel when it's some of the best snorkeling on the planet."

"Too true," Knobby said.

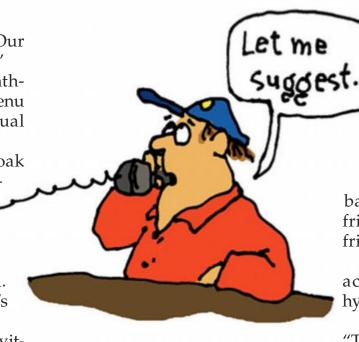
"Any more guidance?"

"I know a lot of women who think 'roughing it' is a hotel where there's no nightly mint on the pillow."

"So we should book one of your VIP cabins?"

"With a plan that includes housekeeping and meals," Knobby said. "The women aren't coming here to do housework."

"Not like we used to, huh?" I said, recalling so many years when our accommodations included our



own Coleman lanterns and stoves, a water pump at the kitchen sink, a two-holer out back, and rips in the cabin's window screens that welcomed clouds of mosquitoes that buzzed our sleeping bags all night every night.

"One more thing," Knobby said. "Try to pick a time when it's warm but not hot, the bugs aren't too bad, and there isn't a lot of rain."

"Wait a minute. That's impossible."

"So is thinking your first coed fishing trip will be a huge success," Knobby said.

"Thanks for the warning," I said.

"Not so much a warning," Knobby said, "as a suggestion you shouldn't be overly optimistic. Some groups of men and women say its the highlight of their lives. Yet one guy told me having his wife here was like getting a brain tumor removed with a hammer and chisel."

I gave Knobby my best wishes, and went back inside with my report. When I finished, the discussion began.

"I figured it wouldn't be without a few hitches," the attorney said. "We should ask the ladies what they think."

"I think my wife might consider it," the banker said, "but only if the rest are in. Or at least most of them."

"I agree," Doc said. "Six guys and one or two women won't look too inviting."

"Maybe we should do a trial outing," the policeman said. "Take 'em on an over-nighter somewhere."

"There's a bunch of Iowa lakes that have rental cabins," I said.

"Again," the attorney said, "this isn't something we can plan unilaterally. We need to get the women on board with the concept first."

"How?" The kid said.

"Which one of our ladies is the most likely to want to do this?" Doc said. "If we have a strong ally, then she can

sell the idea to the rest."

"You really think so?" The banker said. "They haven't been friends as long as we have, but their friendship does run deep."

"Deep enough that they'd fully accept our Northwest Ontario hygiene, or lack thereof?" I said.

"That's a huge issue," Doc said. "They've heard horror stories related to our, um, uncouthness."

"Uncouthness?" The kid said.

"Unrelenting flatulence," Doc said. "Rough language, excessive beverage intake, unhealthy eating, occasional bathing, cigars, that sort of thing."

"In the interest of mixed group harmony, don't you think we could clean up our act for just a few days?" the kid said.

"It's not out of the realm of possibility," I said. "But there's another issue we haven't covered yet."

"What's that?"

"However long we decide to fish, our expenses will be double what they usually are," I said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but when I add a second airfare, along with at least one more vehicle to get 12 of us there and back, and the higher fees for the VIP cabin with meals, license and food, I don't know if my wife will think it's worth it."

"And there's something else," the banker said. "What happens if we take them with us, and they really like it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would we be willing to change our annual outing of male bonding and nature worship to a potentially much less fulfilling annual couples event?"

"Boo!"

"Hiss!"

"Something's even scarier than that," the policeman said. "What if they outfish us?"

For another hour we weighed the pros and cons, and spoke of our undying love for the mothers (and potential mothers) of our children.

"It's all settled then?" the banker said.

"I think it's a brilliant idea," the attorney said.

"A win-win, for sure," the kid said.

"And what do you think?" Doc asked me.

"Let me see if I have this straight," I said. "We continue to go to Knobby's for our annual fly-in trip."

"Correct."

"We explain to our better halves that we considered taking them along, and they will thank us mightily for not subjecting them to an overwhelming array of wilderness hardships."

form at amazon.com.

"Correct."

"And for their incredible selflessness, tolerance, and fully understanding the importance of inflexible guy things, what will we do for the girls?"

"Easy," Doc said. "We bankroll a spa package with pedicure, massage, lunch at a wine bar, dinner of their choice, and a hotel with towels the size of bedspreads and mints scattered on the pillows."

"Still be cheaper than taking them along," the attorney said, approvingly.

"I agree," the banker said. "Besides, what delicate flower, like mine, would want to soil her hands on a salted minnow?"

"I think my sweetie would enjoy it same as me," the kid said. "Maybe we will try a few days at Knobby's as a test run."

"Good idea," Doc said.

"But what if they balk?" I said. "What if a weekend luxury binge of pampered treatment isn't enough?"

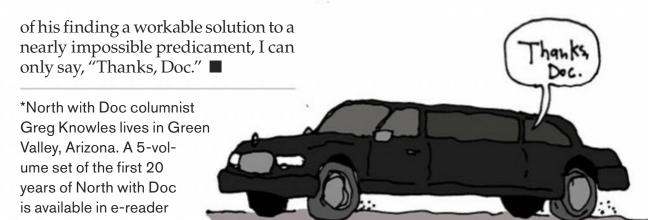
"One word," Doc said.

"What's that?"

"Limo."

As it turned out, the women enjoyed themselves immensely for a pampered weekend while we sat in the boats for six days bathed in dismal driving rain, when it wasn't 105 and blast furnace sunny. We ate and drank too much, got bit to pieces by ravenous skeeters, and caught more good fish than ever before.

Some might say we kicked the can down the road by not finding a way to share our favorite pastime with our ladies. Some might say we bought them off cheap with a cheesy package of excessive physical delights. All that duly considered, in recognition

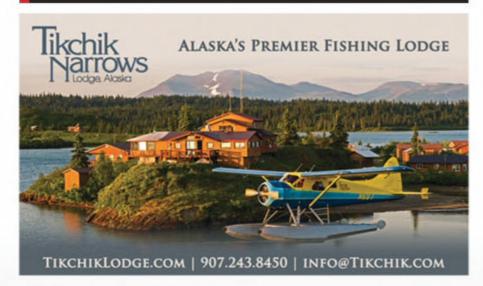






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(continued from page 64) you gather firewood and led him to the pheasant?"

"I told him it was a grouse that was asleep and he should club it with one of the sticks so we could eat it for dinner."

"Then when he did, all that stuffing blew up and the head sprung out like a jack-in-the-box. Houji stood dumbfounded for about thirty seconds before he squawked, 'It's STUFFED!'"

"Well it did keep him from lying so much that trip."

"Just until lunch. As I recall, he saw more deer that afternoon than the rest of us combined, or so he said. Of course, he didn't shoot any so he probably made it up."

The guys grinned and each checked his bait to make sure it still had some wiggle. The boat traffic was light and they had seen no gull activity. The sun rose in the bluebird sky making them drowsy with the warmth.

"You know, it's a wonder we didn't flunk out of college."

"It wasn't the fishing so much as the random things. Like that time you talked me into bowhunting the day before mid-terms."

"Well I didn't know you were going to shoot one. Especially right before dark."

"Once I did, I couldn't just leave it. So we skipped school the next day to go find the deer. And I missed both midterms."

"Did you get to make them up?"

"Just barely. The calculus professor didn't ask many questions, but the physics professor was livid. He gave me a different exam that was harder than the other one. All the problems had come out of the back of the book in the difficult section and I had worked all of them when I was studying. I still remembered the answers. So when I got the exam it was hard not to laugh. I aced it."

"What did the professor do?"

"He was ticked off. But he got even with me on the final. Sometimes you pay for your mistakes later than you expect, but you usually pay."

"Tell me about it."

One of the lines started angling off toward the front of the boat. The two fishermen watched until they knew the fish was committed, and then the angler in the front picked up the rod and set the hook. The fish made a run.

"What do you think it is?"

"Feels like a small striper. Just not enough pull to be too heavy."

As the fish came to the boat, it made a couple circles and came close to tangling the other lines before rolling over on its side into the net. About eighteen inches, the striper was quickly released and swam away with a splash of its tail.

"At least we got the skunk off."

"True, but we might still be eating Beanee Weenees for supper."

"Not me. I've got crappie fillets in the freezer."

"I've got some channel cats. You know, we used to put a hurtin' on the channel cats growing up."

"You remember that river we fished on Saturday nights after work?"

"The one that ran into Smith Mountain Lake? Sure, we never came away empty from a night there. Seemed like there was always one in that hole at the bend that wanted to test our tackle."

"We'd get home so late it was hard to roll out for church."

"Well you slept through it anyway."
"Or got bruised ribs from Mom's elbow."

"Then if someone offered us a spot in a boat that afternoon, off we'd go again."

"Maybe youth isn't always wasted on the young."

"We're not old; just high-mileage."

"Maybe you, but I'm old."

"Well, you're still fishing."

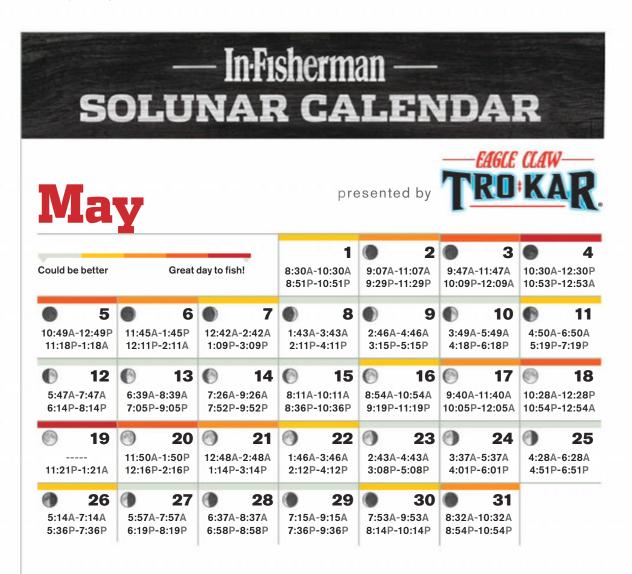
"True enough."

The flow of words slowed to a trickle after that. The fishermen began pulling in their lines without a word announcing the trip was over. They had fished together long enough to recognize the end without having to discuss it.

Their used bait was tossed for passing gulls. Their rods stowed in the same places for the umpteenth time and any loose tackle was tucked into cubby holes where it belonged.

Words may serve to pass the time in a boat, but there also comes a point where time needs to be slowed just for a little. That's especially true when two old guys come together in a boat and bring more than just tackle. They also bring a mutual history that comes alive with the telling of it. And for a morning, the guys can choose which parts they live again.

*Jim Mize tried aging gracefully but quickly gave up on that. His two awardwinning books of humor and nostalgia for outdoorsmen can be found at acreektricklesthroughit.com.



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Reflections

Old Guys in a Boat

Old guys bring more than tackle with them into the boat.

The striper bite was slow. The rods bobbed with the gently rocking boat as it drifted over the old river channel in the upper end of the lake. Twenty feet below, herring minnows swam in varying degrees of shimmies as fish passed but didn't eat. One of the guys poured a cup of coffee and rested it on his knee while he screwed the cap back on the Thermos and then slowly sipped.

"You remember that time . . ." his buddy began, the way old stories always do. It's a rhetorical question because buddies always remember. Then the dam breaks and stories flow like a flash flood.

"... we tied a plastic fish on your Dad's line when he wasn't looking?"

A smile crosses the other fisherman's face.

"Sure, but he deserved it. He was always pulling something on someone. Once he had two guys that wanted him to take them squirrel hunting on the lake, so he let one out on a point that was part of a small island. Then he drove around until he confused the other one and let him out on the other end of the island. They didn't have two hundred yards of timber between them."

"Why did he do that?"

"Probably so they wouldn't ask him again. Besides, they would be easy to find when he picked them up at dark."

"Wasn't it your idea to tie the plastic fish on his line?"

"Yeah, we owed him one. So we waited that night until it got late and we caught one of his lines, pulled it up and tied the fish on. Then before letting it go, we gave a tug to look like a bite and he pulled the fish in."

"Remember those guys in the other boat seeing that red plastic fish in the lantern light and wanting to know what kind it was? Your Dad was laughing so hard he could hardly talk. Then he told them it was a rainbow.

That was when we started laughing."

"He was a character. He'd make you pay if you fell asleep night fishing with him. He'd watch until your head started bobbing, and then he'd yell at the top of his lungs, 'HIT IT!'

When you asked him what that was all about, he'd smirk and say he thought the fish needed some encouragement."

"Remember when your Dad closed his taxidermy shop and had all those leftover animals in the basement. We had a lot of fun with them."

"We must have gotten the prankster genes from his side of the family. What was it you called that hunting buddy of yours that always stretched the truth?"

"Houji."

"Remember the time we set up camp with Houji to deer hunt?"

"And you brought the stuffed pheasant?"

"Yeah, and before daybreak you got Houji to help

(continued on page 63)



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